A Research Agenda for Small and Medium-Sized Towns

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Edited by Heike Mayer and Michela Lazzeroni

A Research Agenda for Small and Medium-Sized Towns

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

Heike Mayer and Michela Lazzeroni

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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2 Between urban and rural: socio-spatial identities in small and medium-sized towns

Annett Steinführer

Introduction

Scholarly research has long disbanded the rural–urban dichotomy or binary (Pahl, 1966; Champion and Graeme, 2004). Rather, 'planetary urbanism' is said to penetrate each and every place at all geographical scales (Brenner and Schmid, 2012). Urbanism is considered 'a way of life' (Wirth, 1938), moulding people's daily lives and biographies in settlements of different sizes and with rather distinct morphological and social characteristics.

It is probably not by chance that such assertions are usually made by urban (and rarely by rural) scholars – and even more, by researchers that work on and/or live in large cities or megacities of the Global North, be they New York, Chicago, London or Berlin. They refer to political-economic processes of global transformation, large-scale urban sprawl and the creation of polynucleated metropolitan regions leaving no space for something that, in seemingly former times, used to be called 'rural' ('the erstwhile "countryside"') (Brenner and Schmid, 2012, pp. 10–11). Such claims do not only prioritise a metropolitan perspective, they also hardly take daily-life accounts of residents living in distinct socio-spatial environments, be they suburban neighbourhoods, peripheral villages or small rural towns, into consideration. Interestingly – and in contrast to scholars claiming the hegemony of 'the urban' in current societies – there are other strands of research highlighting continuously strong images by residents and outsiders about 'the urban' (e.g. Brown, 2015) that significantly differ from images of 'the rural' (e.g. van Dam et al., 2002).

It is fascinating to analyse how small and medium-sized towns, as 'understudied locales' (Brown-Saracino, 2020; see also Mayer and Lazzeroni, Chapter 13 in this volume), are perceived both by scholars from urban and rural studies

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and by residents in terms of their urbanity and rurality. It will be interesting to check whether small and medium-sized towns are placed somewhere on an urban–rural continuum or whether the claim of all-embracing urbanism is also made for these types of settlement.

Set against this background, this chapter explores meanings of and ascriptions to the rural and the urban, respectively, in the context of small and medium-sized towns. It does so predominantly from a Central European perspective where towns and cities often originated in the Middle Ages or the early modern times (1500s/1600s). Small and medium-sized towns first became a meaningful type of human settlement with the emergence of the industrial city in the course of the nineteenth century.

The first part of the chapter considers why to date it is mainly large cities – rather than any other type of urban settlement – that attract urban scholars' attention. But neither do small and medium-sized towns play a large part in rural studies. This fact also needs some exploration. Subsequently, I will change the focus to the subjective perceptions of residents of small and medium-sized towns. I will argue that references to characteristics conceived as either urban or rural are a relevant frame of socio-spatial reference of the residents of small and medium-sized towns shaping their local identities. It is even the opportunity to relate to both perceived urban and rural traits that account for the specific socio-spatial identity of the residents of small and medium-sized towns. As most of these insights and reflections stem from single case studies in different national contexts, a number of research needs arise. Along with the conclusions of this chapter, these are the content of the final section.

Placing small(er) towns in urban and rural research

Small(er) towns from an urbanity perspective

In the course of the nineteenth century, industrialisation and subsequent rapid urbanisation brought about a new quantity and quality of urban life. The city, then, was increasingly considered as its normal expression. In some languages (e.g. German or Czech) compound words emerged to denominate the new societal reality (*Großstadt*, *velkoměsto*) and to distinguish it from just 'towns' (*Stadt*, *město*; for different terms and delimitations in various countries see also Steinführer et al., 2021b, pp. 16–17). In 1887, the first session of the International Statistical Institute defined three spatial categories according to population numbers. Based on a decision already taken during the Institute's

founding meeting in 1885, the lowest limit was a population size of 2,000. All settlements with fewer residents were called 'countryside' – or rather, since this part of the report from the memorable session was published in French (and written by a Hungarian statistician), *campagne*. The upper boundary of 100,000 inhabitants was reserved for a newly denominated urban form: the *grandes villes* ('cities'). The settlements and social realities between these two poles were simply called 'towns' (*villes*) (Körösi, 1887, p. 212). These efforts arose out of the necessity felt by the then elite of the discipline of statistics to provide reliable, internationally comparable and spatially sensitive data.

Also the newly emerging social sciences – first and foremost sociology – developed their relationship to the new type of human settlement. While ambiguity or even overt criticism prevailed (e.g. Engels, 1845), Georg Simmel's famous essay *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* ('The metropolis and mental life', recently retranslated as 'The metropolis and the life of spirit'; Boy, 2021)[1] was the first sociological diagnosis of the interdependencies between the socio-economic environment and individual behaviour in the newly emerging cities. Published in 1903, the essay remains a splendid classic of (not only urban) sociology to date. However, when re-reading this essay with an interest in small(er) towns, other issues come to the fore. It is striking, for example, that 'small-town and country life'[2] (Simmel, 1995 [1903], p. 117 [p. 193]) are mentioned in one breath. They are described as being characterised by a 'slower, more habitual, more regular rhythm in the very sensory foundation of the life of our souls' (Simmel, 1995 [1903], p. 117 [p. 193]). The quote continues as follows:

> This accounts for the intellectualised character of metropolitan life as opposed to small-town life. In small towns, life is founded upon relationships of disposition and emotion that have their root in the more unconscious strata of the soul and are more likely to grow out of the quiet regularity of uninterrupted habits. The place of the intellect, on the other hand, is in the transparent and conscious higher strata of our soul. (Simmel, 1995 [1903], p. 117 [p. 193])

In a small town, 'inhabitants are almost all acquainted and in positive relationships with one another' (Simmel, 1995 [1903], p. 122 [p. 196]) and its 'sphere of life is usually fully self-contained, while metropolitan life crucially moves outwards in waves across a wide-ranging national and international surface' (Simmel, 1995 [1903], p. 126 [p. 198]). As Simmel is particularly concerned with the habitus of the modern city dweller, he also formulates clear statements about his/her counterparts. Simmel holds that 'the metropolitan individual is "free" in contrast to the pettiness and prejudice that confine the small-town dweller' (Simmel, 1995 [1903], p. 126 [p. 197]).

Simmel was not at all interested in the small town or in empirical evidence for his assertions but only in the new phenomenon of the city (in his case Berlin) with its particular mental expressions, metropolitan way of life and differentiated division of labour. In order to make the underlying social changes and their impacts even more impressive to the reader, he established the 'small town' as a negative ideal type to heighten the contrast.

Thus, Simmel's concept of the small town is not a definition. Yet, probably not only in Germany, his conception of the modern metropolis strongly influenced urban research and legitimates a hegemony of city-related research and 'the urban' compared to 'the rural' to date (e.g. Helbrecht, 2013). Some 35 years later, Louis Wirth's paper 'Urbanism as a way of life' (1938) strived at providing clear-cut criteria for urban settlements of different types. The larger the population size, the more dense and heterogenous, the more it is appropriate to speak of a city. Interestingly, his fourth criterion – a permanent settlement – was not treated equally to the others by Wirth. Particularly with regard to small and medium-sized towns in Europe, but also in parts of Asia, this criterion would be relevant to pay adequate tribute to small and medium-sized towns today. Wirth's sociological definition of the city as a 'large, dense and permanent settlement of socially heterogenous individuals' (Wirth, 1938, p. 6) suggests a graduation of urbanism across different types of human settlement. But it also allows for describing small and medium-sized towns from a mere deficit perspective (ARL, 2019, p. 8) – as those urban settlements that always have 'less' than the 'truly urban' cities.

A non-deficit urban(istic) perspective on small and medium-sized towns, then, considers as minimum requirements a certain population size (without strictly delimiting it) and a compact built-up area with a distinguishable urban fabric (Servillo et al., 2017). In Central Europe, this is typically a market square in the centre, a town hall and often the remains of a medieval or baroque fortification or their replacements in the form of a ring street or a promenade (Hannemann, 2004, p. 21). These built structures provide physical as well as symbolic evidence of the formerly relevant borough rights (or town privileges) granted to these settlements by an emperor. Thus, small and medium-sized towns, at least in Central Europe, often have a century-long non-agrarian – i.e. urban – history with a local *bourgeoisie*, a developed division of labour and socio-spatial differentiation. Also today, their economic basis differs and is often a mixture of manufacturing, handicraft, services and tourism (Powe and Hart, 2008).

Small and medium-sized towns from a rurality perspective

Relating Simmel's (1995 [1903]) or Wirth's (1938) understanding of urbanity (or urbanism) to small and medium-sized towns and contrasting them with cities usually leads to a characterisation as comprising 'less': less people, less capital, less infrastructure, etc.

To date, there is no complementary 'rurality' perspective on small and medium-sized towns from a theoretical standpoint. Similar to urbanity, rurality is also conceptualised in different ways. Cloke (2006) distinguishes a functional, political-economic and constructivist approach. Functionally, rurality refers to the structural characteristics of rural areas, often with the intention of distinguishing them cartographically from urban areas. The primary sector or agricultural and forestry land use play an important role in this. In the second approach, external, above all economic and political, factors influencing the development of rural areas are highlighted with different conceptual references (e.g. regulation, centre–periphery and globalisation theories), thus locating rurality in social theory. Finally, rurality is perceived as socially constructed, appropriated and reproduced. Research from this perspective is interested in 'how practice, behaviour, decision-making and performance are contextualized and influenced by the social and cultural meanings attached to rural places' (Cloke, 2006, p. 21). Rurality, then, is defined as 'a multiplicity of social spaces overlapping the same geographical area' (Cloke, 2006, p. 19). The aim of these and similar conceptualisations (e.g. Halfacree, 2004) is to leave any idea of a clear-cut urban–rural binary behind and to establish a pluralised understanding of rurality that is neither deficient nor idyllic.

The relevance of a rurality perspective for small and medium-sized towns can be approached from two angles: first with regard to their regional roles and second relating to their physical structure and size of their territory.

There are quite a few studies that are interested in the importance of small and medium-sized towns for their surroundings. Powe and Shaw (2004), for example, investigate so-called country or market towns in England by taking the example of one small town in Northumberland. They focus on the town's centrality functions – mainly with regard to service provision – to people in the urban hinterland and provide evidence for strong rural–urban relations (for a more general approach see Powe and Hart, 2008). Yet, already in the early 2000s, the authors pointed to the threat to local services through internet orders by villagers. Another function – that of being a tourist centre – is highlighted in research by Lazzeroni et al. (2013) for a medium-sized Tuscan town and by Vaishar et al. (2016) for small towns in Bohemia and Moravia.

Steinführer and Kabisch (2005) analysed the example of a highly peripheral-ised small town in Saxony and focused on how and why insider and outsider perspectives differed in terms of negative (internal) and positive (external) judgements. The tourism function is usually relevant on different scales: for employment on the local and the regional scale; for visitors (e.g. of spa towns) on the regional and national scale; and for international tourists on a European or even global scale. Also, the research by Gkartzios et al. (2017) on regional towns in non-metropolitan Greece relates to their functions on a larger scale by taking a look at mobility decisions by counterurbanists from larger set-tlements and local movers, i.e. those who changed their residential location within the same area. The authors call their spatial setting under investigation as 'neither rural nor urban' (Gkartzios et al., 2017, p. 30).

Despite their name, small and medium-sized towns are not always small in territory. In Germany, for example, about 25 per cent of the small towns (according to the official delimitation of the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development)[3] are larger than 100 km². Extreme cases have a territory well beyond 500 km², often as a result of large-scale territorial reforms from the early 1970s onwards. A number of vil-lages were territorially, politically and administratively incorporated into these new settlement units. With regard to their land use and settlement structure, small and medium-sized towns thus became heavily ruralised (Steinführer, 2016). The territorial reforms were intended to make public government more efficient and contributed to a centralisation of public and private services and, thus, an increase in the functional importance of the urban cores for the rural hinterland (for territorial reforms in a broader perspective, see Swianiewicz, 2010, 2018).

The 'urban' and the 'rural' in the eyes of residents of small and medium-sized towns

The question of how residents of small and medium-sized towns perceive their socio-spatial environments in terms of urbanity and rurality, respec-tively, has not been well researched. Some personal and rather episodic accounts relate, for example, to a rural idyll remembered as the setting of one's childhood, not least given the contrast to later study experiences in Chicago (Brown-Saracino, 2020). The author describes her childhood in New England in a countryside setting 'with rolling hills, farm fields, and forest, a three-classroom-schoolhouse, Methodist church, general store, and Town Hall' (Brown-Saracino, 2020, p. 217). Accordingly, she calls this place

a 'rural town' (Brown-Saracino, 2020, p. 217). This pastoral – and strongly Anglo-Saxon – perspective on the rural and the rural idyll did not remain unquestioned in rural studies in the past decades (e.g. Gkartzios et al., 2017; Shucksmith, 2018). However, from a number of case studies, one might reach the conclusion that landscape-related aspects are a major asset of small and medium-sized towns – and, even more importantly, these landscape attributes are considered as belonging to the town's appearance. References to the surrounding landscape by both residents and 'outsiders' (mostly tourists) in answering the question concerning 'what they liked most' in a certain town was found by Lazzeroni et al. (2013, pp. 463–466). Also, in Hannemann's (2004) study on declining and peripheralised small towns in north-eastern Germany, the small-town dwellers' perceptions of being at home there (in the German original, *Heimat*) was strongly linked to the qualities of the surrounding landscape (Hannemann, 2004, p. 224). Finally, from their research on counterurbanisation trends in Greek non-metropolitan regions, Gkartzios et al. (2017) highlight the coexistence of 'urban–rural identities' (Gkartzios et al., 2017, p. 24). All these atomised findings deserve more systematic attention, comparison and supplement.

There are some promising conceptual approaches and empirical studies on so-called 'lay perspectives' (or 'discourses') on rurality (van Dam et al., 2002), partly complemented by imaginations of so-called 'professionals', like planners or scientists (e.g. Halfacree, 2004). Based on a survey in four municipalities in the Netherlands (two medium-sized and two suburban towns), van Dam et al. (2002) found that 'countryside' was mainly associated with morphological-visual aspects (such as greenery or farms) and with, as they call it, socio-cultural aspects (such as quietness, serenity and social control) (van Dam et al., 2002, p. 465). The desire to live in a residential environment with characteristics was not restricted to places in the countryside. Rather, quite a few respondents also imagined such residential qualities in an urban surrounding. The authors call this a 'demand for living in the pseudo-countryside' (van Dam et al., 2002, p. 469). Most of such research focuses on rural places and a 'town perspective' is not pursued. While, of course, there are a few urban 'counterparts' investigating whether and how perceived place attractiveness and urban amenities play a part in migration decisions (e.g. Brown, 2015), comparative research between villages and towns, between towns and cities or, to put it more generally, between human settlements of different size, fabric and functions is lacking. Such research could enhance our understanding on the actual role of spatial attributes framed as 'urban' or 'rural' in residential preferences and decisions.

Table 2.1   Subjectively perceived rurality/urbanity by residents of different settlement types in Germany (2020; n=3,595)

Respondents living in …[a]	Number of respondents	Subjectively perceived rurality/ urbanity (1 = rural, 7 = urban)		
		Mean	Median	Stand. Dev.
Large cities	544	5.8	6	1.45
Small cities	512	5.3	5	1.50
Large medium-sized towns	404	4.3	5	1.69
Small medium-sized towns	688	3.4	3	1.68
Large small towns	577	2.9	3	1.68
Small small towns	508	2.3	2	1.46
Rural municipalities	362	1.9	1	1.22

Note: Question wording: 'How would you describe the area surrounding your current home within a radius of about 5 kilometres? Is it more rural or urban? Give 1 for "rural" and 7 for "urban". You can use the values in between to grade.' [a] See note 3 for the German settlement typology.
Source: Own calculations based on data of a German-wide population survey in 2020 (unweighted; see text for more information); settlement types (including their designation) according to BBSR (2022).

In the frame of a large-scale population survey in Germany in 2020,[4] we had the chance to apply an already tested indicator of subjectively perceived rurality and urbanity on a seven-point scale (Kreis, 2021) among residents of different types of human settlement – from rural municipalities to large cities. From the results in Table 2.1 it is striking that both mean and median values of subjective perceptions correspond to the official 'ladder' of rurality and urbanity. A relevant 'jump' is to be found between smaller and large medium-sized towns which might point to the fact that medium-sized towns are not only highly heterogeneous in terms of population size (in Germany they range from 20,000 to 100,000) but also with regard to their economic structure and regional functions. Yet, and most interestingly in the context of this chapter, the highest variance of the subjective assessments (as measured by the standard deviation) was found in medium-sized and larger small towns – thus providing evidence for the hypothesis that in these spatial settings both urban and rural socio-spatial identities are most present.

Based on long-term research in and on smaller towns and a broad literature review in the context of a German network of small-town researchers (Steinführer et al., 2021a, 2021b) as well as some specialised research on larger

Table 2.2   'Urban' and 'rural' characteristics of small and medium-sized towns

Characteristics pointing to a higher degree of 'urbanity'	Characteristics pointing to a higher degree of 'rurality'
Urban fabric (e.g. multi-storey buildings at least in centre), historic buildings pointing to (former) importance as central place (e.g. market square)	Reasonable/manageable size
Distinguishable socio-spatial structures (urban neighbourhoods, centre versus fringe)	Perceived social proximity and safety
Professional administration with a certain degree of specialisation and differentiation	High degree of civic engagement
Formal town status (municipal/borough rights)	High share of long-established owner-occupiers
Diversity of public and private infrastructure, centrality (excess importance)	Limited amount of offers and opportunities for social advancement
Functional specialisation (e.g. tourist destination, residential, spa or industrial town)	Proximity to open landscape

Source: Author's considerations particularly based on Steinführer et al. (2021a, 2021b) and the references quoted therein and Schmidt-Lauber (2010).

towns (Schmidt-Lauber, 2010), Table 2.2 summarises perceived characteristics of small and medium-sized towns and places them on the rural–urban continuum. Along with recent scholarly literature from a broader European context (e.g. Servillo, 2014; Servillo et al., 2017), the table goes well beyond population size and also considers morphological, functional, social and administrative characteristics.

Conclusions and open research questions

Small and medium-sized towns, as well as their long-term dwellers, in-migrants and visitors, are fascinating places and actors to explore ascriptions to and meanings of socio-spatial identities along the urban–rural continuum. Urban and rural studies provide meaningful concepts of urbanity and rurality to be applied to towns of various importance and centrality functions as well as in different locations and countries. However, small and medium-sized towns

are rarely considered in urban studies and their degree of urbanism tends to be described in deficit terms. Nor do rural studies systematically approach and investigate rural or regional towns.

Subjective or daily-life accounts of urbanity and rurality are an open research field that can provide us with relevant supplementary knowledge on socio-spatial identities in the settings of small and medium-sized towns. While it might be rather straightforward to locate a megacity and a small village on the urban–rural continuum, small and medium-sized towns are more ambiguous settlement types as they often contain an urban core and rural parts in their vicinities. This makes them particularly interesting for considering both scholarly and residents' perspectives on these socio-spatial settings.

From a methodological point of view, there is a wide range of single case studies focusing on one certain topic and often applying a qualitative or mixed-methods approach, but hardly allowing for cross-case comparisons. A second strand of research comprises national or cross-national comparative studies using quantitative and geographic information system methods (e.g. Servillo et al., 2017). The issues raised in this chapter seem to first and foremost require qualitative approaches, but large-scale population surveys could also be employed. Mixed-methods approaches are thus highly appropriate to empirically analyse scholarly, media and resident ascriptions to and ideas of the urbanity and rurality of small and medium-sized towns. Comparative approaches within one country or in a cross-country context seem to be particularly worthwhile. One might contrast insider and outsider perspectives (as, for example, in Lazzeroni et al., 2013 or Steinführer and Kabisch, 2005). Comparative research on urbanity–rurality perceptions across different types of settlements (from villages to megacities) would be thrilling.

A multitude of unanswered research questions can be derived from both the urban and rural self-images and the characteristics attributed to small and medium-sized towns, such as the following:

- Which residential qualities are required by long-term dwellers and which ones by new in-migrants in small and medium-sized towns? In what way do they differ from the residential qualities expected from or attributed to villages or large cities? How can they inform theoretical accounts of urbanity and rurality?
- How does the widespread spatial attribute of 'reasonable' or 'manageable' size (see Table 2.2) relate to social relationships? What about social distance and how to keep it?

- Which medium- and long-term implications do large-scale territorial reforms in rural areas (Swianiewicz, 2010, 2018) bring about for both the socio-spatial and local identities of village dwellers and the residents of the former (more) compact small and medium-sized towns?
- What is the symbolic meaning of formal town status? Do respective status changes still have a symbolic value for decision makers and the towns' residents today?
- Did functional and symbolic attributes to small and medium-sized towns change during the COVID-19 pandemic and will they last in the 'post-pandemic' era?

Not least, such findings can provide valuable insights for urban and rural planners as to which residential qualities are required in the socio-spatial settings of small and medium-sized towns.

Notes

1. All subsequent quotes are taken from this new translation.
2. Equating small(er) towns and rural settlements is quite common in the United States (e.g. Vidich and Bensman, 1958; Dubbink, 1984) and most prominent in the widely used phrase of 'rural and small-town America' (e.g. Fuguitt et al., 1989; Mattson, 1997). From a (Central) European perspective, the relevance of historical town privileges and a corresponding urban fabric (e.g. a town wall) and, thus, the town's formal and symbolic distinction from a rural settlement must not be underestimated to date.
3. In Germany, cities are considered places with more than 100,000 inhabitants ('smaller cities' range from 100,000 to 200,000, 'large cities' have more than 200,000 inhabitants) (see also Körösi, 1887). 'Smaller medium-sized towns' range between 20,000 and 50,000, 'large medium-sized towns' between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. 'Small small towns' have, as a rule, between 5,000 and 10,000 inhabitants and 'larger small towns' between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants. In addition, for small towns the formal centrality status is taken into account (Milbert and Porsche, 2021, p. 14).
4. As the survey mainly intended to investigate migration and staying decisions, it consisted of five subsamples: one group of rural stayers (people living in rural areas for ten years or longer) and four migration groups (people having migrated between rural and urban areas or vice versa as well as people having migrated within rural areas or between cities in the past five years before the survey). The survey was part of the research project KoBaLd which is jointly conducted by the Thünen Institute of Rural Studies (Braunschweig) and the Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development (Dortmund) (September 2018–October 2022). The project was supported by funds of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture based on a decision of the Parliament of the Federal Republic

of Germany via the Federal Office for Agriculture and Food under the Rural Development Programme.

Suggestions for further reading

A comprehensive overview of the state of small-town research in Germany.

ARL (Akademie für Raumforschung und Landesplanung). ed. 2019. *Small town research in Germany – status quo and recommendations. Position Paper of the ARL 114*. Hannover: ARL. (Extended German version: Steinführer, A., Porsche, L. and Sondermann, M. eds. 2021a. *Kompendium Kleinstadtforschung. Forschungsberichte der ARL 16*. Hannover: ARL.)

An inspiring paper of how to approach and conceptualise rurality that might also be used for conceptualising other types of spatialities (such as urbanity). It is worthwhile applying this thinking to small and medium-sized towns to go beyond the urban–rural binary.

Cloke, P. 2006. Conceptualizing rurality. In: Cloke, P., Marsden, T. and Mooney, P.H. eds. *Handbook of rural studies*. London: Sage, pp. 18–28.

A short introduction into the largest European research project on small and medium-sized towns in recent years (TOWN, 2012–2014, funded by ESPON).

Servillo, L., Atkinson, R. and Hamdouch, A. 2017. Small and medium-sized towns in Europe: Conceptual, methodological and policy issues. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*. **108**(4), 365–379. (Long version: Servillo L. ed. 2014. *TOWN: Small and medium sized towns in their functional territorial context. Scientific report*. Luxembourg: ESPON.)

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3   Small and medium-sized towns: out of the dark agglomeration shadows and into the bright city lights?

Evert Meijers and Martijn Burger

Introduction

It is well known that much urban theory is based on the examples and experiences of a handful of high-profile metropolises in the Western world like New York, Los Angeles, London and Paris. In particular in Europe such a focus on large metropolises is surprising, as large metropolises are the exception to the rule that small and medium-sized cities and towns are actually the dominant form of urbanisation in many European countries. Moreover, trends in the urban system do not suggest that large cities grow faster than smaller cities, certainly not in the first 15 countries to join the European Union (Turok and Mykhnenko, 2007). Europe has actually witnessed shifts from urban to rural areas and from larger to smaller cities and the contribution to national economic growth of large cities has hardly increased (Dijkstra et al., 2013; Meijers et al., 2016), despite the fact that in some more peripheral areas (such as southern Italy) smaller cities are in decline. This all is quite striking, as the 'urban triumph' narrative propagated by for instance Ed Glaeser (2011) has been widely embraced by European and national policy-makers without questioning whether this narrative is applicable to the European context. As a consequence, larger metropolitan regions in particular have benefited from their privileged status as perceived national trump cards in the global economy (Crouch and LeGalès, 2012; Cardoso and Meijers, 2016), receiving a far greater share of public investment in recent decades as they are considered key to gaining global competitive advantage at the expense of increasingly neglected smaller cities and regions (Brenner, 2004; Dijkstra, 2013; Parkinson et al., 2015).

Fortunately, the rising awareness of this research and policy bias towards large metropolises has led to a burgeoning academic literature specifically focusing

on small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs). However, these research agendas overwhelmingly 'seek to debunk theories developed for the metropolis rather than to develop theories about the cities that they are actually focusing on' (Bell and Jayne, 2009, p. 685). As a result, research on non-metropolitan cities has often been made peripheral: theories and questions designed for the largest metropolises are simply downgraded to test their validity in other contexts, without a critical vision of the fundamental differences between the different types of cities (Cardoso and Meijers, 2016).

In this chapter, we argue that one such fundamental difference that affects development perspectives of SMSTs is in how such cities relate to other cities. When taking the 'smallness' of places as a starting point for research, it inevitably requires that the focus shifts away from endogenous local factors encapsulated in the concept of agglomeration externalities, towards what we call 'relational' factors captured by the concept of city network externalities (Burger and Meijers, 2016). So, rather than a focus on agglomeration externalities that is more apt for larger cities, the focus needs to be on city network externalities when theorising about SMSTs. After all, a small city or town will by definition be less self-reliant and hence more dependent on other places. This is sustained by the empirical finding that the importance of relationships for smaller cities is relatively much higher than for larger ones (Meijers et al., 2016). Hence, we argue that development perspectives of SMSTs depend on how these cities and towns relate to other cities and towns. That means that we need to consider their position vis-à-vis other cities, whether small or large, but particularly consider how they are related to those cities. In other words, understanding the development prospects of SMSTs requires us to move beyond the dominant agglomeration theory and instead to adopt an urban systems perspective, which makes clear that what happens in one place is highly dependent on what happens in other places.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will first discuss this urban systems perspective and explain the 'borrowed size'/'agglomeration shadow' framework that captures types of relationships that are specifically important for SMSTs. A brief state of the art in research on such relationships then culminates into a proposed research agenda.

Borrowing and shadowing: a state of the art

We are not saying that a perspective on how cities are related to each other is of importance for SMSTs only. Florida (2008), for instance, perceives globally

interconnected cities as the real engines of economic growth, which is also a core outcome of the research on world cities and global production networks (e.g. Jacobs et al., 2010; Taylor and Derudder, 2016). Again, also when it comes to studying relationships between cities, it seems that the main focus in the literature has been on how large metropolitan cities connect and interact. Counter to what this may suggest, we claim that such a relational perspective actually is more apt for SMSTs, although the scale at which those relationships occur is perhaps relatively less global.

Urban systems have been generally defined as a set of regionally, nationally or globally linked and interdependent urban areas (Bourne and Simmons, 1978). Studying urban systems broadly takes place in five different and not necessarily well-integrated schools of thought (Peris et al., 2018). For SMSTs, the one pre-dominantly focusing on the regional or intra-metropolitan scale and centred on concepts of polycentricity (e.g. Kloosterman and Musterd, 2001; Parr, 2004) seems most relevant as such regional relations probably dominate over global linkages, despite this literature being scattered (Van Meeteren et al., 2016). Moreover, completely isolated cities that have no other cities or towns nearby are hard to find in Europe; while historically and politically distinct, the far majority of cities nowadays have other cities and towns within their sphere of influence. Currently, one-quarter of the European population, and one-third of Europe's urban population, lives in a polycentric urban region (Meijers et al., 2018). To this we can add those living in a multicentric urban region, which is composed of multiple cities and towns, but unlike polycentric regions that contain cities of more or less equal size, the population sizes in multicentric regions are more unbalanced. Actually, for small and medium-sized cities, it makes quite a difference whether they have one or more larger neighbour city/cities or whether these neighbouring cities are of similar size.

The importance of relations between cities

The basic idea that stronger relationships between cities yield important benefits is both old (see historical accounts of European urbanisation, e.g. De Vries, 1984; Hohenberg and Lees, 1985) and widespread (McCann and Acs, 2011). It would lead to what Capello (2000) has termed 'urban network externalities'. This concept refers to the benefits originating from relationships between places (see also Camagni, 1993; Meijers, 2005; Boix and Trullén, 2007; Van Oort et al., 2010; Burger and Meijers, 2016) and can be described as external economies from which firms and households can benefit by being located in cities that at an aggregate level are well embedded or positioned in networks that connect with other cities. For 117 polycentric urban regions in Europe, Meijers et al. (2018) show that the stronger the cities in such regions

are functionally integrated the better they perform in the sense of organising a higher level of urban functions in the regional system of cities. Also, institutional integration, or metropolitan governance, has a positive effect on this performance, although the effect is smaller than for functional integration and seems to increase with the duration of co-operation. The exact shape of that co-operation is of secondary importance, as long as there is some form of co-operation. They conclude that the main challenge is to 'move from fragmentation to integration'. Other studies have shown the presence of city network externalities in the context of multicentric urban regions (Maly, 2016). However, also negative network externalities can be present, in particular when the nearby cities are not functionally integrated (Meijers and Burger, 2017).

Borrowed 'size' versus agglomeration shadows

We need to make a distinction between the general benefits of stronger relationships between cities at the level of the network of cities as a whole and local outcomes of these relationships, as the generative effect at the network level often hides an intra-regional distributive effect (Meijers and Cardoso, 2021). A conceptual framework that captures the possible local outcomes of stronger relationships between cities or towns brings the distinct literatures on 'borrowed size' and 'agglomeration shadows' together (Meijers and Burger, 2017).

'Borrowed size', in its original conceptualisation by Alonso (1973), describes and explains the situation that especially smaller cities that are located in a larger 'megapolitan complex' do perform better because they have access to agglomeration benefits of larger neighbouring cities. In the words of Alonso (1973, p. 200), borrowed size involves 'a small city or metropolitan area exhibiting some of the characteristics of a larger city if it is near other population concentrations'. Hence, size borrowing occurs when a city exhibits urban functions and/or performance levels normally associated with larger cities that enjoy corresponding agglomeration externalities, and this pattern is a consequence of being integrated with those cities. According to Alonso, such patterns would be particularly visible in Europe, and he mentions the Low Countries and Germany in particular. Several case studies provide empirical evidence of such smaller cities punching above their weight, for instance Phelps' (1998) study of Croydon near London and Hesse's (2016) analysis of how the rather small city of Luxembourg could become prominent in specialist financial and corporate sectors. However, also outside Europe there is now increasing attention for the functioning of SMSTs within the regional urban system, highlighting that this is not only a European phenomenon. The definition of what is small or medium sized, though, is sometimes slightly

different (basically 'not mega'). For instance, for a majority of countries, small and medium-sized cities of up to 3 million inhabitants are relatively more conducive to economic growth than very large cities (Frick and Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Johnson's (2021) study of Geelong near Melbourne (Australia) stresses its struggle over identity and autonomy in the process of borrowing and shadowing that could lead to 'winning from second'. But also larger cross-sectional studies have found evidence for borrowed size effects. Polèse and Shearmur (2006) found that employment rates in Canada grew substantially faster in the last decades of the previous century in small cities positioned close to large cities than in small peripheral cities. Partridge et al. (2008) find that greater distance from higher-tiered urban areas negatively affects population growth. Likewise, Sohn (2012) identifies a spillover effect from Seoul on growth in nearby smaller South Korean cities.

Yet, the evidence for borrowed size is not conclusive. Erickcek and McKinney (2006) do not find performance differentials between smaller cities in the metropolitan area of a larger city and isolated smaller cities. Meijers et al. (2016) find that especially larger cities profit from having strong relationships with surrounding cities; they are the ones actually borrowing size, as many of their urban functions build on the support base of surrounding cities. This is confirmed by the study of Sohn et al. (2022).

What these latter studies actually find is that larger cities cast a shadow over their smaller neighbour cities, and as we all know, growth is limited in the shadow. 'Agglomeration shadows' are the opposite of borrowed size effects. The term agglomeration shadows originates in the New Economic Geography (e.g. Krugman, 1993; Partridge et al., 2009) but is also rooted in Central Place Theory (Christaller, 1933). Like borrowed size, agglomeration shadows are the result of integration with nearby or more distant cities, and come from a disconnection between size and performance. A place is under an agglomeration shadow when it has fewer functions and lower performance levels than expected given its size, because of competition effects from cities with which it is integrated through networks and relations. Volgmann and Rusche (2020) draw an interesting parallel with the regional concept of spread and backwash effects, conceptualised by Myrdal (1957), meaning that spread effects are synonymous with borrowing and backwash effects with shadowing.

Meijers and Burger (2017) have turned these concepts into an operational framework, which was later slightly adapted in Meijers and Cardoso (2021). This operationalisation rests on detecting disconnections between the size of a place and its urban functions, or the size of a place and its performance in terms of growth, and is provided in Figure 3.1.

Dimensions of borrowed size		Connection size ←→ function		
		Fewer functions than expected given size	As many functions as expected	More functions than expected given size
Connection size ←→ performance	Performs less well than expected given size	Agglomeration shadow	Performance shadow	Borrowed functions
	Performs as expected	Functional shadow	As expected	Borrowed functions
	Performs better than expected given size	Borrowed performance	Borrowed performance	Borrowed size

Source: Adapted from Meijers and Cardoso (2021) and Meijers and Burger (2017).

Figure 3.1   Extended 'borrowed size'/'agglomeration shadow' framework

Empirical studies into borrowing and shadowing

The operational framework in Figure 3.1 has led to various empirical studies aimed at detecting where in the diagram SMSTs and larger cities can be positioned. For instance, Volgmann and Rusche (2020) do so for German urban regions and Meijers and Cardoso (2021) for places in the Randstad metropolitan region. As such, the approach seems to work, but a main challenge remains the explanation of the patterns found: why is one place in a shadow, and why does another benefit from being close to other cities? Meijers and Cardoso (2021) explored a range of characteristics of these places to conclude

that places that have more functions than expected given their size tend to be historically important, more populous, but with a population having a lower average social status. They also draw more tourists (a very clear mechanism through which places borrow from elsewhere) and they are more strongly related to other cities than places that have fewer functions than expected given their size. Places that witness stronger than average growth – their measure for performance – are, in comparison to those places having significantly less strong performance, characterised by a greater population size, higher social status, more tourism and also more and stronger relations with other cities. The findings on the importance of relations provides evidence for the idea that networks allow borrowing size, whereas the findings on population size indicate that agglomeration externalities are also important.

The findings on the importance of population in borrowing size (along with other factors just mentioned) are in line with the finding by Burger et al. (2015) that on average, larger cities cast a shadow over smaller neighbouring cities rather than these smaller cities borrowing size from their larger neighbour. This was also found in the recent study of Sohn et al. (2022) and is what they consider the normal regularity of urban systems. So in contrast to what Alonso suggested, larger cities actually borrow more often from their neighbouring smaller cities than vice versa. However, things change when there is a national border between neighbouring cities. Sohn et al. (2022, p. 431) find that:

> larger cities do not cast their shadow across the border: borders protect smaller cities from this competition effect and as a result they are not 'emptied' of their functions as we see so often in domestic settings. The opposite is true, as those smaller cities are even able to profit from having a larger city across the border as this allows to borrow size in the sense of expanding the market base for their urban functions.

To explain this pattern, they point at greater market access in combination with a protective role of borders relating to cultural and institutional differences. Moreover, the persistence of national decision frameworks on the location of metropolitan functions rather than a rationalising process at the scale of cross-border regions is of relevance here.

One word of caution is needed as patterns vary according to the indicators used for some urban functions. For instance, a place may be punching above its weight, whereas for other functions it may be overshadowed by nearby cities. This is also observed in the study by Maly (2016), who finds evidence for the co-occurrence of processes of borrowing and shadowing. It all depends on the lens through which it is assessed.

Finally, it makes quite a difference whether neighbouring cities are of similar size or larger or smaller – it's the difference between a polycentric or multicentric region we alluded to before. The general pattern seems to be that agglomeration shadows are hardly cast between neighbouring cities of similar size (unless not strongly integrated), and that in contrast, they seem to be able to profit from borrowed size effects (Meijers and Burger, 2017; Sohn et al., 2022). Numerous case studies of polycentric urban regions explain this effect in detail (Meijers et al., 2014; Danielzyk et al., 2016), although most empirical evidence focuses on Western economies and it is likely that the degree to which firms and people are able to profit from borrowed size effects is dependent on accessibility. In this regard, it would be interesting to see whether similar borrowed size effects can be found. Results for China (e.g. Wang et al., 2019; Gong and Zhong, 2021) show some mixed evidence, while urban mobility is typically worse in low-income countries, which would limit borrowed size effects (see also Burger et al., 2022).

Borrowing and shadowing: towards a research agenda

We propose three main strands for further research on borrowing and shadowing in connection to SMSTs. Of course, there are the important, but perhaps also rather obvious recommendations, such as trying different indicators when operationalising the framework, adding geographical detail, performing an analysis over time and expanding the scope beyond the Global North and Europe in particular. Likewise, we have no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has temporarily or more permanently changed patterns of borrowing and shadowing in a regional urban system, and we need to understand this better. But when taking a step back and looking at the matter from some distance, we particularly would like to recommend an extension of research in three directions.

Exploring types of borrowing and shadowing

Despite its intuitional appeal, the term 'size' in borrowed size is problematic (Meijers and Burger, 2017) in that 'size' is a rather non-descript umbrella term, a proxy for a wide variety of agglomeration externalities, both positive and negative, and as such a simplification of the complex relation patterns that can be found in reality. We already felt the need to discern more precise categories, like 'borrowed functions', 'borrowed performance' and, in a similar vein, discerned a 'performance shadow' and 'functional shadow'. This certainly is not yet an exhaustive and conclusive list. Perhaps it is best to stick to the

terminology that captures the general processes at play – that is 'borrowing' and 'shadowing' – as these represent positive and negative spillovers between cities more generally.

For future research it is recommended to explore the many varieties of how borrowing and shadowing can manifest themselves. Inspiration can come from the traditional mechanisms underlying agglomeration benefits, namely 'sharing' (i.e. making use of a common pool of resources that requires a minimum community size for support), 'matching' (i.e. a large labour pool and a variety of suppliers enhances quality of factor inputs) and 'learning' (i.e. co-location facilitates diffusion of knowledge and spurs innovation) (Duranton and Puga, 2004), which in turn may translate into particular borrowing and shadowing effects. This need for more precision also addresses a concern of Phelps (2004), who criticises the concept of borrowed size for its indifference to the various types of agglomeration externalities.

One important research avenue is to move away from the economic connotation of borrowed size and explore different frameworks based on for instance forms of borrowed happiness or life satisfaction (i.e. experienced quality of life that is derived from conditions in neighbouring places; Lenzi and Perucca, 2020; Hoogerbrugge et al., 2022), borrowed need satisfaction (i.e. experienced satisfaction of basic needs that is derived from neighbouring places; Cardoso et al., 2021) or more generally new measures of prosperity that go beyond economic and growth-oriented paradigms. Hytrek (2021) provides an excellent example of exploring 'borrowing social performance' in Long Beach near Los Angeles. He questions how social movements (e.g. for social justice and labour organisation) in Long Beach managed to 'leverage proximity to larger movements in movement-rich neighbouring cities to create an organizational infrastructure beyond their independent capacity to sustain emancipatory social justice projects' (Hytrek, 2021, p. 159).

Seeing local outcomes of city network integration in light of regional opportunities

Our operational framework (Figure 3.1) essentially presents a typology of local outcomes, at the scale of places, further integration and strengthened relationships with neighbouring cities. It is hard to deny that classes like 'borrowed performance', 'borrowed functions' and 'borrowed size' all have a positive connotation and, in contrast, 'performance shadow', 'functional shadow' and 'agglomeration shadow' a negative one. Being in the shadow of a larger nearby city is certainly not a desirable future for many SMSTs and they try to avoid becoming bedroom communities, as Mayer et al. (2021) show in their dis-

cussion of how Swiss SMSTs try to keep or develop knowledge-intensive jobs in specific niches where they exhibit a path-dependent advantage. However, positive or negative interpretations only make sense when put into a regional perspective. Being in an agglomeration shadow is perhaps much less negative considering that people and firms from such a place can tap into the opportunities offered by a nearby city. The combination of a local residential economy with a more broadly focused regional economy still offers plenty of opportunities. At least, that holds true for those groups that are able to access these regional opportunities which are not organised in the vicinity, and assuring this access should be an important concern for policy-making. Being in an agglomeration shadow might be better than being in an isolated place (see e.g. Lenzi and Perucca, 2020). Similarly, perhaps a city is able to build on the critical mass present in places nearby to sustain a higher level of for instance urban functions, hence, borrowing size, but probably not that well off if the other places have little extra to offer that complements the opportunities in that city. What matters in the end is that a regional urban system is able to cater for the varied needs of its population of households and firms, and hence, having diverse local outcomes is important. Places in an agglomeration shadow may not grow that fast or have a deficit in urban functions, but they may offer opportunities like cheaper land and more spacious housing, a closer connection with nature, a strong community feeling, etc. It may be quite comfortable in the shade when trying to escape the heat. Perhaps the important question then is not in what class of the typology a particular place falls, but whether the regional urban system contains all the necessary types of places, herewith taking also into account whether the smaller places are able to establish functional linkages with other places within the regional urban system. In other words, future research needs a multiscalar perspective of borrowing and shadowing.

Understanding the drivers of borrowing and shadowing

While borrowing and shadowing are made possible through accessibility (Bohman and Nilsson, 2021) and (limited) distance, we previously concluded that it is mostly a product of true interaction (Meijers and Burger, 2017). Further integration definitely is a driver of borrowing and shadowing patterns. But households and firms have a different need for and capacity to exploit integration and connectivity. Future research could focus more on the local characteristics that determine this capacity. Some of the more empirical work on borrowing and shadowing, referenced above, has been generically looking at how cities are positioned vis-à-vis other cities, or how strongly they are related. However, to detect general patterns of borrowing and shadowing, we assume that in particular case studies of SMSTs could shed more light on

this particular question about why they are in a shadow or why they borrow size, also to document how changes in their accessibility, connectivity and interaction patterns have affected specific groups of households and firms in those places. In this regard, it is also interesting to examine inequalities in benefiting from borrowed size and suffering from agglomeration shadows or heterogeneous city network externalities. Looking at such heterogeneity of effects has already been done in the agglomeration economies literature (e.g. Faggio et al., 2017; Stavropoulos et al., 2020; Burger et al., 2022). This could lead to evidence-based policy recommendations that also take account of historical development pathways and unique local contexts that go beyond the 'one-size-fits-all' type of recommendations.

Conclusion: doing justice to the fundamental differences between smaller and larger cities

When studying concepts like borrowed size and agglomeration shadows, attention is inevitably directed to the question as to how smaller cities and towns can enjoy agglomeration benefits and avoid agglomeration costs. However, this runs the risk of doing exactly what we warned against in the introduction: not judging SMSTs on their own merits, but judging them on the basis of a framework that fits larger metropolitan areas better, namely agglomeration externalities. While we suggested broadening the scope of what can be borrowed and shaded (research strand 1) and making a plea for considering city network externalities, we will also have to consider the role of SMSTs in the regional urban system by precisely focusing on their typical strengths and unique character, as these provide a more fitting framework if we want to study borrowing and shadowing from an SMST perspective. Knox and Mayer (2012) consider heritage, liveability, sustainability and the possibility of an 'affective' dimension of feelings and emotions evoked by their scale and character to be comparative advantages of SMSTs. Perhaps the question should not primarily be how SMSTs can gain from larger neighbour cities, but instead, what those larger cities can borrow from nearby SMSTs in this regard.

Suggestions for further reading

Dijkstra, L. 2013. Why investing more in the capital can lead to less growth. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*. **6**(2), 251–268.

The title of this article by Lewis Dijkstra (European Commission) clearly communicates its message, namely 'that over-investment in the capital city is a genuine risk and that having a wide range of cities can enhance a country's efficiency, performance and attractiveness' (p. 251). As such it challenges the 'urban triumph' narrative and 'invest more in large cities' mantra that unfortunately has been uncritically embraced by many governments and the organisations and consultancy firms that advise them. What is particularly relevant about this paper is that it draws attention to the often overlooked political dimension to the development of small and medium-sized cities. It is quite evident that SMSTs have a hard time making themselves heard in national politics where important decisions are made about public investments that often have a spatial dimension. In practice, most European countries have been privileging and prioritising their largest cities; 'state spatial selectivity' is what Jones (1997) calls this. However, Dijkstra argues that investing in a wide range of city sizes, or a portfolio of places, can be more conducive to growth than primarily investing in the largest city. A similar message can be found in Parkinson et al. (2015).

Lenzi, C. and Perucca, G. 2020. Not too close, not too far: Urbanisation and life satisfaction along the urban hierarchy. *Urban Studies*. **58**(13), 2742–2757.

This article moves beyond economic paradigms when studying the process of borrowing and shadowing. Cities not only affect the subjective well-being of the citizens residing within their administrative borders, but also the subjective well-being of citizens that live in close proximity of that city in smaller towns and villages. Hence, urban networks are important to understand the geography of subjective well-being, also known as happiness or life satisfaction. Lenzi and Perucca examined how the proximity to large cities, and therefore the accessibility to their agglomeration benefits, is related to the subjective well-being of inhabitants of smaller places. The authors found that residents of smaller places that are located in close proximity of a larger city have higher levels of subjective well-being. Residents in smaller places that are located near large cities are able to 'borrow' the positive effects of much larger localities, while being relatively insulated from their negative effects. The research by Hoogerbrugge et al. (2022) builds on the findings by Lenzi and Perucca by examining the relationship between polycentricity and subjective well-being.

Pendras, M. and Williams, C. eds. 2021. *Secondary cities: Exploring uneven development in dynamic urban regions of the Global North*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Many SMSTs that have a larger neighbour city fit the description of what is called a 'secondary' city in this recent book edited by Mark Pendras and Charles Williams, who are affiliated with the University of Washington in

Tacoma. They define secondary cities as 'cities that fuel, compete with and are otherwise relationally connected to larger and putatively more "successful" neighbouring cities, but which simultaneously maintain a degree of independent history and identity that mitigates against uncritically collapsing them into the mass of the "city-region"' (p. 2).

This edited volume contains contributions by scholars from Europe, Australia and the United States that delve into the political and economic dynamics of such secondary cities. What is particularly useful for the study of SMSTs is that it (1) considers alternative development strategies for such cities which are rooted in the unique characteristics of such secondary cities and hence not copied and pasted from strategies for large cities, and (2) explicitly adopts a relational perspective advocated also in this chapter: 'What matters … are the relational connections that shape the experiences, choices and possibilities for secondary cities and their inhabitants' (p. 3).

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4 Urbanisation, suburbanisation and territorial development: research issues for small and medium-sized towns

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Introduction

In many countries, small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs) find themselves in a field of tension concerning their overall spatial development, as metropolisation, urban growth and the dynamic development of urban regions impact their position in urban systems and their functions (Banski, 2021a; Meijers and Cardoso, 2021). Questions about the future of SMSTs are particularly relevant on the European continent, where they account for a significant proportion of the population (Servillo et al., 2014a, 2014b). Tentatively, we may cast the terms of the debate as follows: on the one hand, the quality of life offered by certain SMSTs could be an asset for attracting households that currently live in very large cities, either for leisure, as second-home owners or as permanent residents (Knox and Mayer, 2009; Lenzi and Peruccca, 2021). In this process, SMSTs in the vicinity of large metropolises could become full-fledged service centres serving the needs of their inhabitants, instead of functioning only as dormitory towns (Davezies and Talandier, 2014). This rosy view has been fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to significant migration from metropolitan to non-metropolitan areas. But is this trend going to continue in the long term? On the other hand, given the increasing concentration of skilled jobs and higher services in the core of large urban conurbations or in certain developed areas around them (like technology campuses, large hospitals, etc.), SMSTs could become more dependent on large cities. This would imply that more and more residents of small satellite towns commute to big cities for work, higher education, health, shopping, etc. (Servillo et al., 2014a, 2014b). Indeed, the increase in transport speeds has led to a contraction of space time, which gives an advantage to large urban centres that concentrate

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services, activities and employment, to the detriment of SMSTs (Bretagnolle, 2003). In the end, it seems that the economic and spatial interrelationships between SMSTs and large cities are becoming stronger but also increasingly hierarchical. Land pressures and socio-spatial inequalities appear, and planning regulations hardly solve these challenges (Demazière, 2017). In sociological terms, depending on whether or not it is easy to access the big city, there may be contrasting representations of the SMST. For example, they are seen as a 'dull place' or 'green idyll' by local youngsters (Gunko and Medvedev, 2018). As for SMSTs that are far from metropolitan areas, they appear to suffer from a deterioration in their economic and symbolic value (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) and, among various demographic phenomena, they seem to be no longer able to attract or retain the upper classes (Servillo et al., 2014a).

In this context, there is a need for urban studies to make progress on two points. First, analysing the situation and potential of SMSTs is necessary in order to provide a more complete picture of the functional links between urban settlements of big, medium and small size. This research agenda is especially put forward by the chapter by Evert Meijers and Martijn Burger. A second and linked challenge for research is to go beyond the polarised perception of SMSTs that is often present in the literature (ARL, 2019). More than 15 years ago, the authors of the first ESPON study on SMSTs observed that such towns:

> are conceived on the one hand as immature, less-developed or declining cities, in need of policy action from outside and from within in order to cope with present day economic dynamics … On the other hand, they are frequently celebrated as last resorts of true urban ambience and idealised as the most appropriate linkage between the urban and the rural, a potentially sustainable form of urban structure. (ÖIR, 2006, p. 27)

The main aim of this chapter is to move beyond this duality and to propose lines of investigation about SMSTs in the light of urbanisation and suburbanisation processes. France is an ideal case to consider due to the historic role played by SMSTs and taking into account that it currently experiences strong urban sprawl around large agglomerations, which is progressively encompassing small and medium-sized urban centres. The high motorway accessibility of France's major agglomerations and the 3,000 kilometres of high-speed rail lines criss-crossing the country have led to a contraction of space time and a strong opening of local labour markets (Veltz, 2019). Besides, SMSTs have been at the core of debates in the media and in wider society in recent years, and national policies have been set up specifically for them. These aspects allow us to critically examine how the development 'problems' of SMSTs were put on the agenda, the diagnosis developed by public decision makers, but also the axes imagined for redevelopment, and the results obtained. We

will first show that in France, SMSTs are quite diverse, depending on whether they belong to a more or less dynamic region and/or whether they are close to a large city. In a second step, we will show that the national policies targeting SMSTs have been implemented based on the general perception (popularised by the media) of SMSTs in decline, without taking this diversity into consideration. The unique common feature of French SMSTs is suburbanisation, which is reflected here by problems of vacancy of housing or shops in the town centres along with economic and residential development on the outskirts of SMST urban cores. However, the strong communal fragmentation hinders the implementation of regeneration strategies at the right scale. We conclude, then, that the spatial delimitation of a SMST, especially at the institutional and political level, is important for urban regeneration policies.

SMSTs: a geographical object or a political notion?

How to define and identify SMSTs? In the case of France, any scientific exploration should start by acknowledging that before serving as an object of academic study, SMSTs have been placed into categories constructed and advocated by public authorities, both at the local and national levels (Demazière, 2017). In this context, it is important to recognise the advantageous, self-promoting or even nostalgic views of SMSTs as a symptom of the fact that such places are a political category. For scholars in urban studies, paying attention to SMSTs should not mean either to overemphasise their weaknesses nor to idealise them. In the 1970s, the French geographer Michel Michel (1977, p. 657, our translation) detected an ideology operating among policymakers who discovered medium-sized towns:

> The discourse on medium-sized towns is not justified or even concerned by a statistical or functional definition. They associate it with an emotional and flattering description based solely on consideration of appearances and subjective impressions, hence the medium-sized town became decorated by appeal, qualities and virtues. The key words are acceptable, charm, discretion, modesty, humanity, harmony, balance.

At the time, to gain influence over national government decisions, a group of local officials created the Federation of Mayors of Medium-Sized Towns (*Fédération des maires de villes moyennes*). Renamed Towns of France (*Villes de France*) in 2014, this network continues to disseminate positive images such as that of 'friendly towns', 'offering both a greater community feel than big cities and more services than small towns and villages', and that 'contribute to the balanced development of the French territory' (Villes de France, 2013, our

translation). This implies that SMSTs are a plastic concept and a non-neutral one for public decision makers, and researchers should pay attention to this.

In the context of France, small towns and mid-sized towns are two distinct categories (see Table 4.1). The thresholds most often used to identify medium-sized towns delineate a stratum of towns with 20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants. However, within these limits, different meanings of what a town is can be observed. A national policy for medium-sized towns implemented in the 1970s targeted municipalities. Nowadays, the local politicians still put forward this administrative delimitation. Meanwhile researchers favour the continuity of built-up land as a criterion to define medium-sized towns. In the 2000s, in order to place medium-sized towns in the context of their region, the national government opted to consider functional urban areas. More recently, it refocused on urban issues by defining mid-sized towns as urban units with more than 20,000 residents and concentrating at least 10,000 jobs and that do not belong to one of the 22 functional urban areas that include the *métropoles*. With such a definition, there are 203 medium-sized towns, which account for almost 23 per cent of the French population (CGET, 2018).

Reflecting the legacy of a hierarchical vision of the urban system, small towns are defined in relation to medium-sized towns: they have fewer inhabitants and those that have central place functions have fewer services and retail facilities than medium-sized towns. Once again, policymakers consider municipalities while researchers are in favour of built-up areas. This difference is important since the fragmentation of municipalities is extreme in France: there are 35,000 *communes*, that is 40 per cent of all municipalities in the European Union (EU) for only 13 per cent of the European population. In their study of SMSTs commissioned by ESPON, Servillo et al. (2014a) identified SMSTs as built-up areas with a population between 5,000 and 50,000 inhabitants and a density above 300 inhabitants per square metre. They showed that in Nordic countries a SMST coincides with a single municipality whereas in France it covers on average three municipalities, and up to 42. Thus, the core municipality that is associated with a SMST covers only a part of the built-up area and is surrounded by legally independent urban municipalities and/or rural villages. Due to high financial autonomy – more than half of the local revenues of subnational governments come from local taxes – such municipalities may compete for economic and residential development, often to the detriment of the central municipality (Demazière, 2021).

Table 4.1   Definitions of SMSTs in France according to different sources

	Small towns	Medium-sized towns
Associations of elected officials	Municipalities of 2,500 to 25,000 inhabitants (Association of Small Towns of France (*Association des petites villes de France*))	Municipalities – centres of 20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants and areas of intermunicipal cooperation (Towns of France (*Villes de France*))
Researchers	Urban centres (built-up areas) of 5,000 to 20,000 inhabitants (Laborie, 1978)	Urban centres (built-up areas) of 20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants (Lajugie, 1974)
National government administrations	Municipalities and their intermunicipalities of less than 20,000 inhabitants exercising centrality functions (Small Towns of Tomorrow Programme (*Programme Petites villes de demain*), 2020–2026)	Functional urban areas of 30,000 to 200,000 inhabitants (Medium-Sized Towns Project (*Programme villes moyennes*), 2005–2009) Urban centres (built-up areas) with more than 20,000 residents and concentrating at least 10,000 jobs and that do not belong to one of the 22 functional urban areas that include the *métropoles* (Comissariat general à l'Égalité des territoires (CGET), 2018)

Shrinkage, suburbanisation and macro-regional trends

France is characterised by the dominance of the capital city and a relatively small number of large cities, and SMSTs are at the heart of the territorial network. They have a very strong identity, much of which is derived from their long history. In contrast to Germany or Great Britain, where urban structures were significantly changed by the Industrial Revolution, France is character-ised by a very stable urban system (Hohenberg and Lees, 1995). In the Middle Ages, several SMSTs became important trading places or religious centres. After the French Revolution they were selected to house the seats of the local administration. In the years of economic boom (between 1945 and 1975) they became important locations for economic growth (Demazière, 2017). Yet, the French urban system has recently been shaken by the dynamic development

of some urban regions, the development of mobility and changing preferences regarding work and living places.

Two superimposed geographies help to understand the challenges faced by urban areas in France (CGET, 2017). First, two groups of regions are experiencing very different evolutions in population and employment. Due to their demographic and economic dynamism, Atlantic and Mediterranean coastal areas, along with the Rhone Valley and the Paris region, stand out from the north-eastern quarter of France affected by deindustrialisation and form a centre with sluggish demographics due to the noticeable ageing of its population. Second, it is possible to distinguish major types of areas (metropolises, SMSTs, periurban and rural areas) with differing dynamics and problems. Overall, large cities have benefited more from recent economic changes than SMSTs and rural areas, and an increasing polarisation of the largest urban areas can be observed in all regions, resulting in the expansion of periurban areas. In contrast, various thinly populated areas have been experiencing population and employment losses for several decades. But these major variances in overall dynamism mask a huge heterogeneity at the local level. If we consider large cities (taken here to mean urban areas with over 200,000 inhabitants, apart from Paris), those in the west and south of France (e.g. Nantes, Rennes, Bordeaux, Toulouse, Montpellier) record the highest economic and demographic growth. In contrast, the large conurbations in the east and north (such as Lille or Strasbourg) record growth levels lower than the national average, although still higher than the pace of growth in their respective regions. In brief, SMSTs heavily depend on the dynamism of the region to which they belong and/or on their proximity to a metropolitan area (Demazière, 2017). Some are highly dynamic while other towns experience the cumulative effects of decline: fewer inhabitants and jobs, vacant accommodation and the closing of services (Berroir et al., 2019).

Suburbanisation is widespread in France (Gaschet, 2011). It corresponds to two parallel developments in the urban system: the decline of certain town centres and the dynamic growth of certain periurban villages. The latter are characterised by remarkable demographic growth and are generally experiencing a process of suburbanisation. They have entered the field of influence of a city (or a town) and have become satellite settlements. For instance, in Brittany, a growing region in the west of France, the population of small towns (urban units with 2,000 to 20,000 inhabitants) has increased between 1990 and 2015 at a higher rate (24 per cent) than that of the region (18 per cent) (Baudelle et al., 2019). A dozen small towns have seen their population grow by more than 70 per cent, some even more than doubling their numbers. These are always small periurban towns, located in the residential spillover

area close to the two most dynamic agglomerations in Brittany, namely Rennes (the largest city with over 450,000 inhabitants) and the medium-sized town of Vannes (80,000 inhabitants). Other small towns have lower growth rates but they are still above the regional average. This type groups together periurban towns located generally at a greater distance (more than 30 minutes) from the major urban centres and coastal localities located in the orbit of medium-sized coastal towns. Thus, a high proportion of the small towns in Brittany are growing periurban places. The correlation of the growth rates of SMSTs with the proximity to a large agglomeration, evaluated in terms of distance and time by road, is significant.

These cases of SMSTs linked to large cities can be found in many regions in France. As mobility increases, so does the disconnect between the places in which one lives, works and consumes. Laurent Davezies (2009, p. 48, our translation) considers:

> that an ever-larger share of revenues entering cities or regions of industrial countries have nothing to do with the local production of tradable goods and services. Retirement pensions, public sector wages, social benefits and healthcare reimbursements, tourist spending, and income from workers living in the region and working elsewhere (commuters) are all revenues that sustain our regions without any connection to the level or quality of their productive systems.

In suburban SMSTs or touristic ones, imported revenues may well be spent in the area and represent a high number of jobs. This implies that the facilities and amenities with which SMSTs are equipped, but also their built and natural heritages, are contributing factors to residential or touristic attractiveness.

In spite of this, the economic and demographic dynamism displayed by large French cities has nurtured the idea of a territorial divide between metropolises, bastions of the elite that bear up well, and forgotten peripheral areas that could be abandoned (Guilluy, 2014). This view is too schematic: it is quite simply impossible to group all territories classified as 'metropolise', 'small town' or 'isolated rural' into the same category, as there is far too much variation in their development trajectories and in their inhabitants' profiles (Berroir et al., 2019). Furthermore, in France, most of the underprivileged population lives in the largest urban areas, not in the smaller or in the rural areas (Demazière and Sykes, 2021). Nevertheless, the simplicity of the image of a territorial divide, the rise of the extreme right vote in 'peripheral areas' and the recent 'yellow jackets' movement have gradually modified the priorities of national urban policies, as we shall see in the following section.

To what extent shrinkage and suburbanisation affect SMSTs would need more research. In recent decades in France, the problems facing SMSTs have been more and more revealed and terms like crisis, decay and decline are a few of those used to describe these types of town. Seen as the most important factors leading to decline, metropolisation and deindustrialisation encourage the out-migration of the population and the displacement of activities out of the centre (Berroir et al., 2019). However, it can be argued that these factors have actually affected entire macro-regions with their SMSTs, cities and rural areas, rather than impacting only SMSTs as an independent category in all regions. This observation could be refined in future research. In a first step, using population data, it would be possible to identify regions in which there is a prevalence of the population living in SMSTs. In a second step, we could analyse the relative performance of such regions in terms of population growth, employment, gross domestic product, etc., and compare them with regions with a higher degree of urbanisation. These lines of analysis could be pursued in various national contexts to test the importance of regional trends for the dynamics of SMSTs. Here the term 'region' should not be understood as a territory covered by a regional government, but as a functional space that may have fuzzy limits. For instance, a region may span over several national borders. In their pan-European study of SMSTs, Servillo et al. (2014a) identified a strong presence of SMSTs in a central sector of the European continent going from the south of England throughout Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and the west of Germany to Italy. Partly overlapping with the so-called 'Blue Banana', this area happens to host a large part of the EU population and contributes to the largest share of the EU gross domestic product. While this region contains metropolitan city-regions (e.g. London, Randstad, Ruhrgebiet, Milan), it also includes a large number of SMSTs. This underlines the importance of small or medium-sized urban settlements for population development, production and innovation at the European scale.

To analyse the changing situation of SMSTs in their territorial system would be another promising axis of research. Building on the first ESPON project dedicated to SMSTs (ÖIR, 2006), we could *a priori* distinguish three primary situations: (1) SMSTs that are integrated in metropolitan development trends; (2) SMSTs that polarise their hinterland; and (3) cases of functional interaction between SMSTs in a given region. In such a perspective, the significant variable determining the functional structure of a SMST is its location, especially with regard to large urban centres.[1] In a second phase, analyses of the urban system could be made based on quantitative data about the flows of people. Indeed, the mobility of people, due to the wide variety of motives, durations and frequencies of travel that it covers, is an essential indicator for analysing the relationships between urban settlements. Where the data exist, it is important

to take into account not only home-to-work mobility, but also home-to-study and leisure mobility (Servillo et al., 2014a).

While such measures do not involve much difficulty, to analyse the effect of the geographical location of a SMST on the functions it performs is more challenging. Actually, future research may show that none of the three positions distinguished by ÖIR (2006) is more advantageous than the others; it all depends on the complementary relations created between SMSTs and the urban system to which they belong. A SMST may take advantage of being integrated into a metropolitan region, but it can also be equally damaging with traffic congestion, the shrinkage of local shops and services to the population and a certain loss of identity. Similarly, 'isolated' SMSTs may act as important development poles in their region and demonstrate dynamic growth, while others may have a limited catchment area (for education, culture, etc.) due to the competition of other development centres. It should also be noted that interactions among SMSTs can be both complementary and competitive and their impact on the development of towns therefore varies according to the situation at hand.

The growing importance of SMSTs in policy development

Since the beginning of the 2000s, national spatial planning policy in France has mainly focused on supporting large cities (Demazière, 2021). Such policies are inspired by the work of the American economist Michael Porter (1985) on the benefits of the spatial agglomeration of economic activities. These orientations show a weakening of the objectives of territorial equality as they have long been applied in France (Demazière and Sykes, 2021). Indeed, regarding the conception and implementation of national policies particularly focused on SMSTs, three very different rationales, taking place in distinct periods, can be shown. From 1973 to 1982, the finance of infrastructure and urban development measures was ensured by a contract-based policy for medium-sized towns that involved the central state on the one hand and municipalities on the other (Demazière, 2017). In the following three decades, SMSTs were no longer subject to any specific planning or development policy. Rather, they suffered from the adverse effects of state reforms in various sectors (health, justice, security). Under Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012), a major reform of the territorial administration of the state was initiated, aimed at reducing public spending deemed excessive. For example, the number of justice courts fell from 1,206 to 815 in five years. In medium-sized towns the reduction in services meant downsizing the equipment, for instance, hospital beds were removed. But in small towns the reduction often led to the complete disappearance of the

equipment. Nearly all the district courts of small towns were closed in favour of the jurisdiction of the county seat attached to the district court. This national policy of shrinking services thus reinforced the differences between urban areas according to their size, making the level of SMSTs more vulnerable than the large city level. It has greatly impacted the development of SMSTs, both in terms of loss of functions and employment (Baudet-Michel, 2019) and generating brownfield sites in need of new uses.

In the context of such 'shrinking' SMSTs, one line of research would be to question the capacity of these territories to invent 'alternative' urban strategies that are less focused on the objective of population and employment regrowth and more concerned with the well-being of the inhabitants (Fol, 2020). In Japan, Germany and the United States, the length and intensity of urban decline processes have led to the implementation of actions to resize the city and adapt it to a smaller population and fewer activities (Béal et al., 2016). However, the question is to know whether abundant and low-cost land opportunities allow new uses to be envisaged, less dependent on profitability and market constraints, or whether their massive presence in the built environment is an obstacle to the changing image of a SMST.

Facing the visible effects of this policy which weakened basic services and functions in SMSTs, the problems of the most fragile non-metropolitan territories have emerged in the public debate in the last ten years (Dormois and Fol, 2017). Two channels for putting non-metropolitan urban areas on the agenda are worth mentioning. First, the national policy that tries to revitalise disadvantaged urban districts, most of them belonging to large cities, has been reformed (Demazière and Sykes, 2021). The left-wing government of François Hollande decided in 2012 to refocus on a more limited number of districts (from 2,500 to 1,000). To do this, the identification of 'priority neighbourhoods' was based on a single criterion: the urban concentration of population whose resources are less than 60 per cent of the national median income, i.e. the poverty line. Due to this change in eligibility criteria, SMSTs have made a big entry into the policy scheme. In 2020, 169 medium-sized towns (out of an identified total of 197) included one or more 'priority neighbourhoods' and 98 benefited from funding for massive urban regeneration. This included 76 old centres in SMSTs, while half of them had never been involved before.

This spatial extension of the '*politique de la ville*' raises questions which could certainly be explored in future research. To what extent is it possible to apply a policy essentially designed for the peripheral districts of large cities, to the central district of SMSTs? In the last decades, city centres of such towns have often been the subject of local or regional policies aimed at residential and

commercial revitalisation, while the national government was absent (Berroir et al., 2019). What then are the convergences or, on the contrary, the conflicts, between the *politique de la ville* and these other policies? Châtellerault, a mid-sized industrial town in the west of France, is a case in point (Dupuy Le Bourdellès, 2018). For 20 years, the municipality has been carrying out a revitalisation and residential attractiveness strategy for the city centre based on various initiatives: maintaining a diversified commercial offer, improving public spaces, creating cultural events, etc. The entry of the district into the *politique de la ville* created the fear of interference with these efforts, because of the bad image that this administrative qualification carries. Thus, the town hall opposed the integration of the city centre school into a priority education network, despite particularly unfavourable socio-educational indicators. As an elected official of the city declared, 'our aim is to keep the attractiveness of this school, not to scare the new families who settle in Châtellerault' (Dupuy Le Bourdellès, 2018, p. 3, our translation).

In contrast to this case, other SMSTs have been enthusiastic about the funding opportunities provided by the Agence nationale pour la rénovation urbaine (National Urban Renewal Agency) for urban regeneration. This reveals the strong dependency of such towns on national directives and finance (Demazière and Sykes, 2021). Most of the time, regeneration takes the form of a massive demolition of housing from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s located on the edge of urban settlements while parallel efforts are made to renew housing in historic centres. Does this indicate the power of cultural heritage references in SMSTs? Or does it reveal the ideological orientation of the state renewal agency? Further research is welcome along those lines.

Another issue, that of the devitalisation of town centres, first highlighted by the question of commercial vacancy, has made more visible the problem of the place of SMSTs in the national urban system (Fol, 2020). In the mid-2010s, the association of mayors of medium-sized towns, *Villes de France*, built a coalition of actors to make the problem of weakened SMSTs visible and to propose courses of action. As a response, in only a few years, several programmes have been launched by the national government in order to fill the gap in public action towards SMSTs.

With regard to small towns and villages, an experimental programme for the revitalisation of town centres was launched in 2014. It took the form of a call for projects and mobilised 230 million euros, with the aim to consolidate the presence of 'small dynamic and lively urban centres, in the countryside as well as in peri-urban areas'. This program calls for a number of criticisms. First, the number of laureates (53) is quite low compared to the 302 municipalities

which had been identified by the regional branches of the state and then invited to apply to the call for projects. Second, this experiment was intended to draw more general lessons from the actions carried out in order to adapt the arrangements relating to public policies for the revitalisation of towns and city centres. On this point, the programme has derailed to the extent that the projects have lagged far behind in the winning towns and villages (Demazière and Sykes, 2021). For example, due to its administrative burden, less than 2,800 dwellings were restored, in total, between 2015 and 2020, in the 43 municipalities that are still involved (ten have left). Where the plan concerns retail trade, ground floors of buildings have been renovated but attracting other retailers has proven difficult since many inhabitants tend to prefer shopping malls in peripheral areas.

Regarding medium-sized towns that are located some distance from metropolitan cities, the national government launched in 2018 the Heart of Town Programme (*Action Cœur de ville*). This programme will devote 5 billion euros to the regeneration of the city centre of 222 medium-sized towns. A year later, the newly created National Agency for Territorial Cohesion initiated the Small Towns of Tomorrow Plan (*Petites villes de* demain), which is supposed to target 1,600 small urban areas. With such support of the national authorities, French SMSTs clearly have a set of options for organising and financing urban development and renewal projects. However, much effort is required to curb the current devitalisation of town centres suffering from high vacancy rates in both housing and commercial premises. The challenges are visible in the core town, but the solutions should be agreed for a much wider area. In practice, the municipalities on the edges of SMSTs continue to have considerable political influence locally due to a lack of reform of municipal structures. One of the main causes of the decline of the core of SMSTs is the exacerbation of competition (fiscal, residential, commercial) between centres and peripheries within functional urban areas. However, *Action Cœur de ville* does not provide for any specific mechanism or tool to act on these dynamics on a large scale. The mayor of the core municipality should engage – with no guarantee of success – in difficult negotiations with his colleagues in the intercommunal cooperation structure, and also with actors who are reluctant to consider any constraints regarding their location and development strategy like developers, supermarket groups, cinema operators, etc. (Delpirou, 2019). The development of a governance system for SMSTs therefore sometimes meets considerable local resistance from the periphery. Similarly, the division of responsibilities between municipalities and intermunicipal bodies, for example in the field of urban planning and housing development, can be a significant factor in implementation difficulties. For instance, in the Heart of Town Programme, the mayor of the town centre (rather than the president of the intermunicipal

body) has the privilege of leading activities even though the consequences of the issues concerned extend far beyond the territory of the municipality. It thus seems that this programme confuses 'the space of the problem (the city centre) with that of its solution (the conurbation and its fringes, if not the entire catchment area)' (Delpirou, 2019, p. 6, our translation).

These issues around the conception and implementation of national policies open up avenues of research that could be pursued in the coming years. To start with, do the local strategies incorporate some strategic dimensions of contemporary urban development, like mobility and accessibility, or do they ignore them? And to what extent are the national programmes implicitly shaped by an agenda geared towards the development of metropolitan areas? Are local decision makers influenced by the flagship urban regeneration projects that were developed in metropolitan areas, and do they try to reproduce them in SMSTs where such projects are not adapted to their specificities? Research could also explore housing policies, to examine whether local actors seek to produce a supply of luxury housing in order to attract new privileged social groups rather than to retain the populations already present. Also, there would be room for reflection on planned degrowth as a potential alternative to neoliberal dogmas of urban planning (Béal et al., 2019).

Conclusion

In the last ten years, SMSTs have gained increased attention and interest. The case of France illustrates this trend, showing that SMSTs should be understood as a specific type of settlement. Yet, their future prospects depend greatly on their relations with the region and with other SMSTs and cities nearby. More research is needed on the effects of urbanisation and suburbanisation on the development potential of SMSTs. It remains to be seen whether the policy responses that have been developed at the national level are relevant and coherent. Are the guiding principles and new instruments the 'right ones' or do they implicitly draw on urban development models related to spatial competitiveness? It seems that, just like large cities, SMSTs tend to develop strategies to increase their attractiveness and quality of life, sometimes neglecting local realities. In contrast, it could be argued that the lines of development of SMSTs and especially their insertion into urban systems will be increasingly influenced by ecological, digital, demographic and technological changes. The resilience of SMSTs to such transformations may vary a lot which offers a very promising field for research.

The experience of France also helps to ask more generally what is the overarching spatial objective of national urban policies (Zimmermann and Fedeli, 2021). After decades of urban regeneration in big cities, is there a turn towards a broader understanding of the urban question? Is there room for a broader set of territorial interventions targeting SMSTs and rural areas with structural problems? The case of France shows that establishing broader policy schemes for urban settlements of different sizes is not easy if the specific issues for defined places are not clearly identified and if the solutions are not devised at the level of the functional urban areas. In spite of this, Zimmermann and Fedeli (2021) point out a pragmatic turn in national urban policies:

> the policy dilemma is no longer whether national governments do or do not privilege some cities while paying less attention to others, but becomes how public agencies can find policies able to work in a selective and strategic way, producing impacts that can benefit urban societies in a differentiated way. (Zimmermann and Fedeli, 2021, p. 323)

This opens up broad perspectives for research on the interplay of actors, at the national and local levels, in the regeneration of SMSTs and also on the effectiveness of the actions implemented.

Note

1. For instance, in Scotland, 'very remote small towns' have been identified as urban settlements with between 3,000 and 10,000 inhabitants, separated by at least 60 minutes' travel time (by land or water) from a centre with at least 10,000 inhabitants (Banski, 2021b).

Suggestions for further reading

Banski, J. ed. 2021a. *Routledge handbook of small towns*. London: Routledge.

This book is devoted to the role and functions of small towns in territorial development in countries with different levels of development and economic systems. It focuses on the role of small towns in regional and national urban systems, on relationships between small towns and rural areas and on the challenges of spatial planning in changing developmental contexts. The book has a wide spatial scope, covering 25 countries all over the world.

Chouraqui, J. 2021. Medium-sized cities in decline in France: Between urban shrinkage and city centre devitalisation. *Raumforschung und Raumordnung*. **79**(1), 3–20.

This paper analyses the decline of French medium-sized towns, focusing on two processes: the devitalisation of city centres and urban shrinkage. The author also explores the relationships between these processes by underlining their similarities and differences. Using data analysis and multivariate clustering methods, the author compares medium-sized towns with small towns and large cities. It appears that a large number of medium-sized towns experience decline especially in their urban core.

Demazière, C. 2017. Dealing with small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs) in urban studies. *Espaces et sociétés*. **168–169**(1), 17–32.

This paper argues that SMSTs have a specific place in urban research, and that their study complements rather than copies research on big cities. It asks: What is the specific contribution of research on SMSTs in the field of urban studies? This question is explored in two complementary ways: (1) by surveying the various contributions of French urban researchers on SMSTs throughout the twentieth century; and (2) by reviewing the contribution of research on large cities over the last 20 years. It concludes that investigating SMSTs as part of research on geography and urban planning is both relevant and useful.

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5   The resilience of small and medium-sized towns in times of crisis and recovery

Michela Lazzeroni

Introduction: the dynamics of small and medium-sized towns in scenarios of socio-economic recession

The resilience in small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs) is closely connected to their evolutionary processes and their (in)ability to respond to socio-economic transitions and identity crises. From this perspective, understanding the stories of SMSTs, with their crises and restarts, implies considering their relationship with large cities and processes of increasing urbanization.[1]

Large cities have historically represented the main decision-making centres, spaces for the circulation of new ideas, seats of economic and political power and areas of concentration of activities, population and services, both for their own benefit and for that of the surrounding regions, according to the spatial model first codified by Christaller (1933). Cities have also emerged as places specialized in knowledge production, where urban elites, researchers, economic actors, and producers of culture exchange ideas and generate innovations. It is therefore not surprising that for a long time the demographic dimension has been considered the basis for the classification of cities according to the rank–size rule (Zipf, 1949; Berry and Garrison, 1958) as well as an indicator of economic development (Frick and Rodríguez-Pose, 2018): the larger the city, the more the agglomeration economies and signs of prosperity, dynamism and cultural stratification are present. These aspects have been further strengthened by the industrial revolution and the related urbanization processes.

However, in different historical phases, a set of SMSTs has also performed intermediate functions as political centres, markets of agricultural products, localization of crafts and religious practices.

Despite their size, they have become part of the backbone of urban hierarchies in national and regional systems, especially in Europe (Clark, 2009). Some of them have grown in close connection with industrial development processes, which in the early stages followed the logic of localization based on the endowment of natural factors, geographical position, availability of resources and accessibility. In other cases, they have turned into industrial centres and one-company towns, whose identity is strongly influenced by a single large firm (White, 2012).

Since the 1980s, the process of deindustrialization in some Western countries and the progressive growth of activities linked to cultural activities and technological innovation determined a new discontinuity in the organization of urban systems and a radical change in the role of SMSTs. In fact, mainly large cities, and especially some city-regions (Sassen, 2002; Kemeny and Storper, 2020), have attracted financial investments, corporate decision-making centres and new forms of cognitive-cultural capitalism (Florida et al., 2017; Scott, 2019). All this has contributed to demographic decline and socio-economic stagnation of other regions and smaller centres, especially in marginal geographic areas.

More recently, the 2008 global crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, with their socio-economic shocks and several waves of health crises, have highlighted SMSTs' resilience, i.e. their capacity to react and adopt recovery solutions. First, these global crises have underlined the vulnerability of small towns and rural areas located far from metropolitan areas, especially in terms of telematic infrastructures, availability of services and investments in innovation (Florida et al., 2021; Lazzeroni and Zamperlin, 2021).[2] At the same time, some opportunities have also emerged thanks to the better liveability of SMSTs and flows of people who returned to live in small centres, with the possibility of smart working and valorization of socio-cultural amenities (Escalona et al., 2021). Furthermore, some scholars have noticed the potential of intermediate cities in implementing place-sensitive policies, leading to a better balance among economic growth, poverty reduction and quality of life (Rodríguez-Pose and Griffiths, 2021).

In this scenario of growing complexity and uncertainty, but also opportunities, what could the future of SMSTs be in response to the shocks generated by the economic and pandemic crises? What role can they play in shaping recession-related restructuring processes and in contributing to a new urban order? In dealing with these questions, this chapter considers resilience as a key concept for interpreting the evolution of SMSTs.

In particular, it refers to some definitions of resilience, according to the meanings used in regional and urban sciences, which provide the theoretical framework used to explore the paths of SMSTs in post-recessions (Davidson, 2020) and their ability to govern (or not) change processes (Besser, 2013). It then presents the components – dynamic capabilities, contextual factors and institutions – that can affect the resilience of SMSTs. In the conclusions, two issues are considered: the reinterpretation of urban resilience from a relational perspective, with particular attention to the role of digital technologies, and the exploration of narratives built around new visions of development and resilience, which can encourage smaller communities to activate dynamics of revitalization.

What kind of resilience? Multiple definitions and approaches

The concept of resilience, originally developed in the science and technology context, has also been adopted, in recent years, in social and regional sciences, to address the recovery processes of systems after natural and environmental disasters and economic and health crises. For example, the 2008 economic recession and emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic represent shocks which have determined decline and crises, but which have also triggered reactions and restart attempts. As a matter of fact, resilience has become a widely used term in both the current scientific and political debates, as also evidenced in economic recovery plans drawn up by various European countries.

However, various definitions of resilience exist, used in different ways according to the various theoretical approaches and areas of analysis. Some authors (Martin, 2012; Kurikka and Grillitsch, 2020) link contributions regarding this topic to three main categories: engineering, ecological and evolutionary resilience.

The engineering approach underlines the capacity of a system to return to a previous equilibrium after a shock ('bounce back'). Holling (1973) explored this type of resilience, considering the speed at which a system returns to its original equilibrium after a perturbation. From this perspective, places and communities are resilient if they foresee changes and crises and maintain a situation of stability or if they show dynamics of self-organization, rapidly recovering the initial configuration. This perspective, which emphasizes the ability of a system to restore equilibrium, can be useful to understand the evolution of

SMSTs in terms of preserving their natural and cultural heritage as well as their own identity characteristics in the face of external events and forces.

The ecological definition of resilience (Holling, 1973; Gunderson and Holling, 2002) highlights the ability of a system to resist perturbations without changing its structure and identity, and takes into consideration the magnitude of the disturbance that the system can absorb before moving to other equilibrium states (Adger, 2000). In this case, the application of the concept to local societies focuses attention on the strength or vulnerability of some systems in resisting upheaval, both of an environmental and economic-social nature, and to manage resources efficiently. This approach to resilience is also used in regional and urban studies to identify discontinuous behaviours of variables and lock-in or path-dependence situations in the evolution of systems, in the face of external stress that requires an internal change and a new balance. In the case of SMSTs, the ecological perspective, which refers to the balance between natural capital and other components of human life, is often used to capture the responses of local communities after natural disasters and external stresses (Alexander, 2013). In particular, small towns dependent on natural resources need to enhance their capacity to maintain or recover the complex interplay between social and ecological spheres, for example, by exploring new forms of collective action and community-based management (Tompkins and Adger, 2004). In this field, Stotten et al. (2021) try to understand and evaluate the social-ecological resilience of some remote mountain villages in Tyrol, Austria, considering different kinds of variables linked to economic activities (agriculture and tourism) and land management and water use strategies.

The third perspective, inspired by behavioural psychology as well as by ecology, emerged within the evolutionary approach to the study of regions and cities, and starts from a different conception of systems and their evolution. According to this interpretative key, systems do not pass from one state of equilibrium to another, but change over time, adapting and transforming themselves in response to external and internal events (Pendall et al., 2010).

Consequently, resilience is not considered an ability to return to normality and stability after a disturbance, but as a complex and uncertain process of systemic change and continuous response to discontinuities and adversities. What interests us is the 'becoming' of a territory and a community as well as their ability to interconnect dynamics of persistence, adaptability and transformability across multiple scales and timeframes (Davoudi, 2012). In this regard, Pike et al. (2010) propose focusing on the adaptability of a system rather than on the adaptation to pre-defined scenarios in the short term. Therefore, the concept of adaptability does not stop at the simple dynamics of

passive adaptation, but rather calls into play the ability of a system to abandon a previous development model in favour of a new development trajectory, in close connection with global changes and trans-local networks.

The evolutionary approach, looking at the long-term ability to strengthen development paths (Boschma, 2015), seems to be the most suitable concept for the medium–long-term interpretation of the resilience dynamics of SMSTs. In fact, SMSTs are affected by economic situations and social transformations of different types: from de-ruralization to industrialization, from industrial growth to decline and relative depopulation, from marginalization to the promotion of innovation, local cultural resources, tourism and quality agriculture. For example, Mehmood (2016) applies the concept of evolutionary resilience to the case of transition towns in the United Kingdom, exploring their capacity to improve social relations among communities and stakeholders and promote adaptability to change and bottom-up creativity.

This notion also appears more oriented towards transformation processes of urban contexts and the generation of new development trajectories (Giovannini et al., 2020; Lazzeroni, 2020), opening a passage to the analysis of the evolution of the system and also of the role of human behaviours and actions, local policies and various forms of capital (material, immaterial and social) (Bristow and Healy, 2014; Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020).

Exploring resilience in small and medium-sized towns: dynamic capabilities, contextual factors and institutions

The application of the concept of resilience to SMSTs is particularly significant in the current global economic scenarios and the COVID-19 pandemic, which have highlighted the dialectic centre/periphery and at the same time awakened interest in smaller and more liveable geographical areas, often marginal ones. In Italy, for example, the renewal of small towns located in internal areas (such as rural and mountainous ones) has often been discussed in recent times, together with a fascinating hypothesis about the possible bright future of small, smart and connected villages. This discussion has generated a broad scientific and political debate, emphasizing the importance of investments in infrastructures and of specific actions for territorial development (Graziano, 2021).

Beyond the fascinating – and a bit rhetorical – back-to-the-village perspective, it is interesting to think about the main determinants that can affect the resilience of SMSTs, especially in this period of recovery, characterized by the

availability of financial resources and territorial rebalancing objectives. First, resilience is closely linked to the dynamic capabilities of an urban context as a whole (including local leadership, social and economic representatives, communities, etc.) to react to emergent dynamics and to elaborate new development paths. The concept of dynamic capabilities, extrapolated from business disciplines (Teece et al., 1997), highlights the potential for reconfiguring and restructuring internal and external competences that can be triggered by a system to deal with stresses and specific difficult conditions. According to Sotarauta (2005), dynamic capabilities are not simply the capacities to act and 'to do something', since they represent a set of different abilities (strategic, absorptive, interpretative, etc.) linked to local actors that enable the region or the city to use and reconfigure its available resources, to adapt to the changing environment and to promote regional/urban development. Marques and Morgan (2021) also underline how the innovative potential of even less developed areas is connected to the organizational capabilities of different types of local actors.

With this notion, we do not refer to a specific type of adaptive resilience, i.e. a system's ability to adapt to changes towards pre-defined scenarios or towards new development models linked to the previous ones or alternatively to them (Martin and Sunley, 2015); rather, we are taking into consideration a definition of resilience based on two characteristics: (1) the transformative dimension (Giovannini et al., 2020), which indicates the ability of a system and its actors to change its structure and create the conditions to promote development; and (2) the orientation towards generative practices (Lazzeroni, 2022), which emphasizes the dynamics of creating new visions and forms of territorial self-organization. Considering the dynamic capabilities of SMSTs, different situations and scenarios can emerge. On the one hand, thanks to their size, after periods of crises and shock events, they can show greater flexibility to change and the possibility of building and sharing development place visions; on the other hand, difficulties in providing new resources, as well as closure and resistance against new ideas, may arise, especially in SMSTs with a strong industrial specialization, that may produce lock-in dynamics.

The generative drive of resilience in SMSTs is also closely linked to the promotion of contextual factors, that is, the capacity to identify more promising activities and to valorize SMSTs' core competences and distinct resources to define new goals. SMSTs, especially those located in marginal areas, are often characterized by a lower endowment of services, economic activities and infrastructures, and for this reason, in recent years, have been subject to decline. However, this marginality could be considered a potential starting point in terms of liveability and less pollution, better conditions in the housing market,

greater participation in social life and the enhancement of cultural and territorial heritage (Bell and Jayne, 2006; Knox and Mayer, 2009; Klusáková and del Espino Hidalgo, 2021). We can cite as an example the case of Volterra in Tuscany, a town with a past specialization in the extraction and processing of alabaster, which has promoted culture and tourism, enhancing its rich artistic and landscape heritage and its own geographical marginality (Lazzeroni et al., 2013). Similarly, Besser (2013), who analysed resilience in 99 small rural towns of the Midwestern state of Iowa in the United States, also emphasizes the role of quality of life and civic engagement.

Other studies describe cases of innovation and high-tech entrepreneurship in small and peripheral towns, considered 'innovative territorial niches', both in terms of production of new knowledge and in the formation of high-tech clusters (Levy and Jegou, 2013). In this regard, Mayer (2020), after interviewing entrepreneurs operating in two valleys in the Italian region of Piedmont and the Austrian region of Osttirol, suggests the adoption of slow innovation as a possible interpretative key. This concept may stimulate some SMSTs to enhance stratified knowledge and the physical, social and cultural proximity of researchers, as well as their ability to design long-term technical research less dependent on frequent interactions with customers and partners and more selective in their links with circuits of knowledge at an international level (Shearmur and Doloreux, 2016).

The road towards the resilience of small towns with an industrial past and a typical one-company profile is more tortuous; in a scenario of economic decline and growing unemployment, it could suffer in terms of decreasing place quality, persistence of conservative attitudes and nostalgic attachment to the past. The strong industrial identity can, on the one hand, constitute a substratum of skills and entrepreneurial dynamism that may push towards the creation of new productive vocations; on the other, it could be an obstacle in the ability to collect other resources and activate alternative production chains and cultural initiatives. In Italy, among the cases of small industrial towns in search of a new identity (Lazzeroni, 2020), we can mention Pontedera, the town of the famous Vespa, which, in the face of a decrease in employment by Piaggio – the company which produces it – has undertaken new paths of development based on innovation and culture, recovering abandoned areas from a large industry. Similarly, Ivrea, where Olivetti – once active in the production of typewriters and later calculation machines and computers – was set up, after the decline of the company still appears to be anchored to the past and unable to seek alternative vocations. In other cases, such as that of the mining town of Heerlen in the Netherlands, the search for new identities, through the promotion of place-branding strategies aimed at urban regeneration, has clashed

with the different urban imaginaries emerging among local actors and resident groups (VanHoose et al., 2021).

In fact, a decisive role for the resilience of SMSTs is represented by the activities of institutions and local actors and place-specific practices, in contrast to generic and top-down policies. In this regard, Bristow and Healy (2014) highlight how the literature on regional and urban resilience, following a certain tendency towards determinism, risks analysing only the evolution of the system and reaction to shock events through the examination of some variables and indicators. On the contrary, the comprehension of the contribution of the human and institutional components in the dynamics of decline and/or recovery appears fundamental, especially in reaction to internal or hetero-directed processes and stresses to change (Wagenaar and Wilkinson, 2015).

The most recent literature has tried to fill this gap, introducing the agency perspective in the study of economic and social resilience. This approach focuses attention on how the various actors, not only those in the institutional and political field, but also others (entrepreneurs, associations, place leadership, collective agency) can contribute to the adaptation processes and the construction of new growth models (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020). In this regard, the example of small urban centres such as Bra in Piedmont and Bolgheri in Tuscany can be cited. These towns, thanks to the role of entrepreneurs and associations, such as Slow Food in the case of Bra, have contributed to a return to agriculture and a promotion of activities in the field of food and wine, with a view towards sustainable development.

In SMSTs, the role of local policies and the network of institutions and actors can highlight advantages and disadvantages in comparison to large urban centres. A greater involvement of stakeholders and the local community is possible in defining place-oriented actions and determining dynamics of alignment and place making, where even more marginal parts and weaker social groups can find space (Besser, 2013). However, some negative trends may also emerge, connected to the lower institutional plasticity and therefore to a limited propensity of the local system to renew itself (Strambach, 2010); as a consequence, the strength of internal ties, if they intensify the local social capital and active participation of the population, risks the determination of closure and limited access to external resources, relationships with other urban contexts and development scenarios based on the combination of autochthonous imaginaries and global visions (Peters, 2019).

The relational dimension in resilient SMSTs: the role of digital technologies

In scenarios with a strong trend towards globalization and digitalization, urban resilience should also be interpreted according to a relational perspective, which takes into account the complexity and versatility of the interconnections among different processes at multiple scales and timeframes (Massey, 2005; Davoudi, 2019). This dimension appears particularly relevant for SMSTs, which should rethink their paths towards survival in contrast to decline, opening to the outside, exploring new ideas with an international breadth, connecting with larger cities in terms of accessibility and functions.

Considering the definition of small towns presented by Lorentzen and Van Heur (2012, p. 5): 'we can approach the smallness of small cities as relational. Small cities are what they are through the relations they have and develop', their development is conditioned by the ability to build different forms of interaction, as well as by the geographical extension and intra- and inter-regional networks. Meijers et al. (2018), adopting an urban systems perspective, have demonstrated how the dynamics of SMSTs are dependent on the relationships they establish with other cities, both large and smaller ones, following a logic of functional and institutional integration.

The relational component has become even more significant in recent years, with the growth of the platform economy and the pervasive use of technologies in everyday life (work, leisure, tourism, culture, etc.) (Kenney and Zysman, 2020; Capineri and Romano, 2021). In fact, the processes of socio-technological transformation and digitalization are important to close the gaps and weave new forms of relationships between centres and peripheries, offering new opportunities for the fragile and geographically marginal areas. An example is represented by the connection to touristic platforms (such as Booking or Airbnb), which has amplified the visibility and attractiveness of some small towns and inserted them into international tourist circuits. While causing some negative repercussions on local manufacturing vocations and the commodification of some historic centres, the diffusion of the digital platforms has nevertheless contributed to the resilience of some marginal areas and, for several of them, to the redefinition of development scenarios.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the role of technologies in determining new ways and geographies of work that can foster the resilience of SMSTs and further fuel development scenarios (Bürgin et al., 2021). The increase in smart working, establishment of co-working spaces and tendency

towards multiple work locations all open new reflections on the revaluation of less central areas, such as small towns and rural and mountainous areas. In fact, these have usually been considered peripheral and not very attractive both from a residential point of view (because they are far from the main centres) and from economic and professional perspectives (in relation to isolation and inadequate socio-economic conditions). The tension between central and peripheral areas could become even more central given the changes that are characterizing the nature of companies and workspaces. The organization of companies and their ideal location is likely to be redefined by digitalization and remote interactions, to the point of redesigning the spatial division of labour and, consequently, the future of SMSTs (De Propis and Bellandi, 2021).

However, some critical issues remain to be considered, including those which regard the perspectives and narratives of the post-pandemic recovery (Graziano, 2021). If the resilience of SMSTs is understood in terms of the ability to enhance not only territoriality and sustainability but also the relational dimension, the problems linked to infrastructural deficiencies, particularly evident during the pandemic phase, have highlighted digital divide situations, poor physical accessibility and a limited supply of basic services (education, healthcare, culture).

Consequently, investments in services and infrastructures represent a priority for the resilience of some marginal SMSTs and to guarantee, beyond rhetoric, the basic conditions for retaining and attracting residents (especially the younger generations) and supporting new forms of entrepreneurship and use of space. Furthermore, the promotion of smart villages and emergence of new geographies of work and living imply a careful evaluation of the recovery actions of smaller centres, in order to avoid real estate operations, hetero-directed interventions, processes of 'eliterization' of economic activities and social presences. Therefore, for SMSTs, the dynamics of self-organization of local actors seem relevant to govern these processes as well as the ability to build projects with a bottom-up approach and convincing narratives to orient the development paths and practices of urban communities.

Conclusions: towards a research agenda on the recovery and resilience of SMSTs

The successive COVID-19 pandemic waves have brought up the term resilience, emphasizing the need to activate recovery actions after the health emergency and economic and social crises. In this context of shock events, the

notion of resilience, already present in urban studies, has become more pertinent to focus the attention on recovery dynamics and responses to decline. Nonetheless, the period we are experiencing is an opportunity to establish a revival of SMSTs, aimed at avoiding 'bounce-back' processes and building new paths of generative resilience, through investments especially in digitalization, education, youth, culture and green sustainability.

Consequently, it is necessary to think of a research agenda on SMSTs finalized primarily at interpreting how they have responded to the economic and social transitions of recent years and how their communities, local actors, workers and citizens are currently reacting to the pandemic shock. In this direction, a methodology based on case studies appears to be particularly useful, especially if data-based analyses are accompanied by qualitative surveys; in fact, this could permit the detailed examination of the contextual factors, long-term dynamics and adopted strategies, affecting the different trajectories undertaken by SMSTs. Focusing on case studies, various field research techniques can be experimented, based on direct observation, ethnographic practices, interviews with leaders and policymakers, surveys on the points of view of residents, which are particularly effective to better understand the determinants of resilience in SMSTs, the role of local actors and the relevance of community-based projects. Comparative analyses also allow us to identify similarities and differences between urban experiences and understand the connections, misalignments and idiosyncrasies between territorial anchors and phenomena that occur at different scales (Robinson, 2015).

Another issue to be reinterpreted about resilience in SMSTs regards their capacity to enhance the territorial resources on the one hand and promote new forms of relationality on the other. This entails the recovery of the relations of the population and economic actors with the local context, the reactivation of the reterritorialization of some services and the strengthening of infrastructures. At the same time, it is important for the future research agenda to explore actions, investments and plans oriented at facilitating a multipolar and cross-scale development perspective, in which the trends towards the digitalization of some services and platform urbanism can, potentially and if well managed, activate new paths of recovery and urban governance (Barns, 2020). In this context, the role of local policies and projects promoted from below with a coordination across scales emerges, and such a role should again be central in geographic research and urban resilience studies.

In connection with the role of agency in urban change paths, a field of study which should be further explored regards the perceptions of the population, the narratives which emerge in urban contexts and the collection of local

needs. In other words, research on urban resilience should also consider the social and symbolic meanings attributed to the city and the smaller town by the local community, which are expressed through opinions and narrative languages (Goldstein et al., 2015). Therefore, the interpretation of the resilience in SMSTs does not end with the analysis of their ability to adapt and undertake new paths, cultivating a relational dimension of development; it also involves giving space to the urban imaginaries of the various actors and residents, which can influence the prospects for local regeneration and planning. This means exploring the ability of a town, albeit a small one, to imagine its own future, without losing its local culture, community ties and sense of place of population. It also means paying attention to the ability and difficulty of constructing narratives aimed at uniting common paths and threads, on which a plurality of actors and people recognize themselves towards the definition of a shared development vision.

Notes

1. In this chapter, SMSTs are considered according to the size identified by DG Regio (between 5,000 and 50,000) and the classifications used in the ESPON TOWN Project (Servillo et al., 2013, 2017).
2. In this regard, Florida et al. (2021, p. 19) underline that the changes in the post-pandemic will concern the urban micro scale more than the macro context. The authors write: 'The general winner-takes-all geography of global cities is likely to persist … Even if the downtowns of these cities lose out somewhat to their suburbs and nearby small towns, the general, winner-take-all geography of cities will persist. Most medium-sized cities and rural areas, especially those far from dynamic economic centres, may lose out.'

Suggestions for further reading

Bristow, G. and Healy, A. 2014. Regional resilience: An agency perspective. *Regional Studies*. **48**(5), 923–935.

This article underlines the role of human agency in shaping regional resilience, introducing the relevance of exploring the individual and collective behaviours in relation to different shocks and in different contexts. The agency perspective focuses the attention on the responses and decision-making capacities of the agents and on the political agendas. This work is interesting since it emphasizes the role of intentional and purposeful human actions and place-based policies in constructing regional and urban resilience.

Goldstein, B.E., Wessells, A.T., Lejano, R. and Butler, W. 2015. Narrating resilience: Transforming urban systems through collaborative storytelling. *Urban Studies*. **52**(7), 1285–1303.

This paper considers the narrative approach to understanding the resilience dynamics of urban systems and the self-organizing processes in reaction to disturbances and to shape a pluri-vocal vision of the future. Analysing some case studies, the authors underline the relevance in integrating narratives and engaging communities in the resilience planning and coordinated strategies. This article is original because it introduces an alternative perspective in the study of resilience in SMSTs, offering insights for new methodologies of analysis and action-research enquiries.

Lazzeroni, M. 2020. Industrial decline and resilience in small towns: Evidence from three European three case studies. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*. **111**(2), 182–195.

The text applies the concept of resilience to investigate reactions of small industrial towns in the face of processes of deindustrialization and identity crisis. Following the evolutionary approach, urban resilience is defined as the dynamic capabilities of a town to respond to changes and valorize place resources and it is influenced by the institutions and local policies. The article is important for its focus on resilience in small towns and for the proposal of a theoretical and methodological framework to analyse contexts involved by economic shocks and social transformations.

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6. Innovation and entrepreneurship in small and medium-sized towns

Heike Mayer

Prevailing 'urban bias' in innovation and entrepreneurship research

Innovation and entrepreneurship only play a minor role in research on small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs). As crucial economic development dynamics, innovation and entrepreneurship are mostly associated with large cities (Mayer and Motoyama, 2020). Thus, as scholars and teachers, we are used to pointing to entrepreneurial hotspots like Silicon Valley, Boston and Stuttgart. We utilize theoretical models such as industrial clusters (Porter, 2000), regional innovation systems (Asheim et al., 2019) and entrepreneurial ecosystems (Spigel, 2020) without acknowledging or even recognizing that these conceptual models have been developed in the context of large cities or metropolitan areas. Yet, the large city context is quite different from that of an SMST. While the large city boasts a great number of firms, different types of economic actors such as support organizations, higher education and research organizations, research partners, etc., a medium-sized city or small-town may lack part or all of them. In addition, SMSTs differ in other characteristics necessary for innovation and entrepreneurship to flourish.

Most studies of innovation and entrepreneurship in SMSTs make several problematic assumptions. First, there is an implicit 'urban bias' when studying the geography of innovation and entrepreneurship. Shearmur (2017) highlights this and argues that often innovation is identified from data that are urban-related and that dominant theories on innovation and how such dynamics unfold describe creative processes in the economy as an urban phenomenon. Others such as Mayer and Motoyama (2020) add that often the lived experiences of researchers studying entrepreneurial and innovative regions is quite urban and that the small or medium-sized town context is left out simply because we as researchers have not fully experienced the more

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peripheral places. Indeed, large cities have seen increased innovation and entrepreneurship dynamics in recent years and they do deserve attention. Yet, given the discussions around cohesive territorial development, left-behind places, etc., it is important to also turn our attention and experience towards smaller urban places. The notion of the 'urban bias' is neither novel nor specific to innovation and entrepreneurship studies and the debates go back to the 1970s (Dufty-Jones, 2014; Lipton, 1977, 1984). Second, there is a bias in terms of the type of innovation and entrepreneurial dynamics that are studied. Often research focuses on high-growth entrepreneurship, which is associated with fast-growing industries such as high-tech, life sciences, creative services, etc. The pro-growth and pro-technology bias leave out many alternative forms of innovation and entrepreneurial endeavours that may indeed find a fertile environment in the small and medium-sized town. Given the urgency to also find ways to develop more sustainably and to apply existing technologies to social and environmental problems, perhaps the application of innovation and the utilization of new ideas is more important than developing it from scratch (Tödtling et al., 2021). Third, and this is a point that has only more recently emerged, SMSTs (as well as peripheral places in rural or mountainous regions) are by no means isolated 'islands of innovation' (Simmie, 1998). Rather, they are connected through modern information and communication technologies and innovators and entrepreneurs can reach the hotspots in the world (Bürgin et al., 2021; Mayer et al., 2016).

What do we miss by glossing over SMSTs when studying innovation and entrepreneurship? We not only miss empirical accounts of how smaller urban places are able or are not able to change their economic fortunes. Moreover, on a theoretical level, we miss a differentiated perspective that takes a different configurational set-up of the local innovation and entrepreneurial ecosystem into account. If we are truly interested in taking a systems view, as has been suggested, we should be serious about configurational theorizing, as Marques and Morgan (2021) argue. Merely stating that certain ingredients in the local economy are missing and a small-town is characterized by 'thinness' (Tödtling and Trippl, 2005) does not give satisfactory answers to questions about the outcomes of development. Some authors have argued that innovation (and this possibly holds true for entrepreneurial dynamics) may not always lead to development and that there are other reasons than the mere absence of a critical mass of certain factors.

The bulk of studies of innovation and entrepreneurship in SMSTs are not concerned with how creative and entrepreneurial processes work or do not work or to what extent economic actors have or do not have the capabilities to innovate and be entrepreneurial in the small-town context. When we consider the

unique context of small or medium-sized towns, we must reconsider our theories and models of local innovation systems and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Smaller urban places deserve attention on their own part

SMSTs often fall through the cracks when it comes to studying innovation and entrepreneurship. The 'urban bias' is only one reason for this omission. However, another factor may lie in the emergence of research of innovation and entrepreneurship dynamics in rural places. In recent years, this line of research has become more prominent, partially as a long-overdue and necessary answer to the urban bias in economic geography. Research is interested in explaining why certain rural places or the actors in such places are innovative and/or entrepreneurial. Some of the insights relate to the ways in which innovative firms are able to reach out to distant innovation partners. This line of work shows that innovative rural firms need to have a certain capacity to absorb the knowledge gained through outside partnerships (Grillitsch and Nilsson, 2015). Generally, it is acknowledged that firms compensate for the lack of factors, but that they also exploit the unique characteristics of a peripheral region (Eder and Trippl, 2019). Similar insights exist from entrepreneurship research in rural or peripheral places (Korsgaard et al., 2015; Mayer et al., 2016; Stathopoulou et al., 2004). Taken together, the focus on the rural or the peripheral is quite important, yet it also leads us to gloss over the SMST or conflate it with the large cities.

However, when we consider SMSTs, we need to consider that they are neither rural nor urban. Steinführer (2021, p. 63) calls the small-town a 'type of settlement "between" the village and the city' and notes that our notions of urban led to the disappearance and also conflation of smaller urban settlements with rural places. In the following, I will explore four different themes that have implications for research on innovation and entrepreneurship in SMSTs. The themes pay particular attention to aspects of size of the urban, the capabilities of actors, the links actors in SMSTs form and to the idea that innovative and entrepreneurial action needs to be considered more broadly.

Small but beautifully diverse

SMSTs are settlement types that do not have 100,000 or 1 million residents. And neither are they places that have thousands of businesses. I live and

work in Switzerland. Switzerland's largest city is Zurich and this large city has around 420,000 residents and slightly more than 45,000 businesses. My hometown Thun, a medium-sized town that ranks 11th in the list of Swiss cities by residents, has around 43,000 residents and slightly more than 3,200 businesses. Yet, the nearby small-town of Burgdorf has 16,000 residents and only 1,200 businesses. Thun and Burgdorf are not villages. They are urban because they have a certain degree of urbanity exemplified by their population density, their morphology as well as a certain degree of heterogeneity when it comes to their society and economy. Simply arguing that the SMST lacks actors in terms of numbers but also in terms of its diversity is short-sighted. This line of thinking takes up the conceptual notion of 'organizational thinness' (Tödtling and Trippl, 2005) and it is argued that these places miss business clusters, that they have few support organizations and that their institutional structure is weakly developed. As a result, innovation activities are missing or below average.

Even though SMSTs are not as large, they can be quite diverse as a result of their unique urbanity. The notion of 'diverse diversity' in SMSTs (Meili and Shearmur, 2019) suggests that innovative firms benefit from different types of diversity. There is internal diversity stemming from the labour force that is recruited from heterogenous sources (national, international, etc.). The second type of diversity relates to interactions that take place between different types and classes of employees. Firms in small towns benefit from interactions that cross formal boundaries (e.g. the boss talking to the line worker during lunch and solving a problem that way). Lastly, firms in small towns reach out to other innovative partners and gain knowledge diversity through these external linkages. Taken together, this research suggests that innovative firms in SMSTs leverage the urbanity of the place to their advantage. Thus, small towns might be beautifully diverse rather than bleak and thin when it comes to leveraging existing actors and organizations.

The diversity in SMSTs and its implication for innovation and entrepreneurship can be a fruitful avenue for further research. Investigations can focus on related diversity in SMSTs and the question as to how these types of urban environment benefit or hamper the diversification of their economy into related or completely new industries. The principle of relatedness (Hidalgo et al., 2019) may work out differently in a small-town compared to a medium-sized town. Examining this difference might be quite interesting because it can tell us something about how economies in differently sized urban contexts evolve and change over time. It may help us understand the ways in which small and medium-sized economies diversify and to what degree their economic actors rely on existing diversities.

Capabilities, not quantity of actors

Often, SMSTs are seen as less dynamic than their larger counterparts. Yet, research has shown that in Europe the category of SMSTs performed very well on socio-economic indicators when compared to large cities/agglomerations. In Germany, for example, the group of SMSTs performed rather well between 2000 and 2016 when it came to employment and was on par with large cities. Particularly those SMSTs in central locations were responsible for this development as they benefited from their central location and accessibility (Mayer, 2019). In the European Union we see similar dynamics. While in the 15 original countries of the European Union large cities (more than 100,000 inhabitants), in particular, grew faster than the SMSTs (defined in this study as 5,000 to 100,000 inhabitants) between 1995 and 2001, this trend did not continue in the years 2001 to 2006 (Dijkstra et al., 2013). The population growth of the large cities slowed during this period until the SMSTs were at the same level. A trend reversal can also be seen in economic performance data. Since 2001, rural and intermediate regions showed stronger gross domestic product per capita growth than the predominantly urban regions (Dijkstra et al., 2013). Thus, it is no longer the largest cities that grow the fastest, rather we have to turn our attention to smaller urban places and even rural areas. Frick and Rodríguez-Pose (2018) support these findings with an analysis of panel data for 1980 and 2010 for 113 countries worldwide. The key finding of their analysis is that smaller cities are more important for the positive economic development of a country than large cities (more than 500,000 inhabitants). They conclude that there is no linear relationship between urban size and economic success and that, in addition, the size of a country plays an important role in the contribution that small and medium-sized cities make. Thus, small and medium-sized countries whose urban populations are predominantly located in small and medium-sized cities benefit more from this type of city.

The mounting evidence about the performance of small and medium-sized cities suggests that we must rethink our understanding of urban size and its relationship to economic performance. Urban size seems to be a condition that does not automatically lead to economic success. Thus, the notion of agglomeration economies needs to be considered and we ought to take into account that innovation and entrepreneurship can also flourish in a context in which agglomeration economies that are the result of size are missing or are not very strong. What might matter more are the capabilities of actors to innovate and be entrepreneurial. These capabilities are important because they help economic actors to change and adapt to different situations and to come up with new ideas.

Capabilities are key to local development. Indeed, particularly in an SMST context that is characterized by few actors, lack of resources, etc., the question arises how individuals and organizations can mobilize their own resources and those of the local community. Marques and Morgan (2021) highlight that it is important to focus more on the organizational capabilities and on the ways in which these capabilities are used to create innovation outcomes that make a difference locally. This is the case, for example, when a very capable economic actor in the small-town economy (perhaps a so-called hidden champion firm) engages in partnerships with local firms and, through this type of networking, local firms are able to advance and develop their own capabilities. Innovation that leads to improvement of the capabilities of local actors then implies local development. Yet, if the large firm tends to focus on external partners because they seem and are de facto more capable, then the outcomes bypass the small-town economy.

Capabilities evolve over time and firms in the SMST economy adapt to changing circumstances. Salder and Bryson call this capability 'adaptive embeddedness' (Salder and Bryson, 2019). Their study of small and medium-sized enterprises in five small towns in the West Midlands, United Kingdom, highlights the fact that firms engage in a process of 'adaptive embeddedness', which allows them to configure existing small-town resources in different ways (structural, emotional and circumstantial).

Scholars of SMSTs could study the ways in which existing economic actors such as hidden champions, large anchor firms or higher education and research institutions develop capabilities over time and how these capabilities allow them to connect to the local economy. In what ways do lead firms convey their capabilities to other local actors and how does the local economy benefit? How can capability shortcomings in the SMST be identified and addressed? What kind of economic development policy is suitable to address capability shortcomings?

Reaching beyond the town

From a relational perspective, innovative and entrepreneurial actors do not confine their activities to the SMST economy. There is increasing evidence for the connectedness of economic actors in SMSTs and for the ways in which their networks to distant partners can help them stay innovative. This line of thinking connects with growing evidence that SMSTs are able to overcome their liability of smallness by forming networks or being connected with other

cities (Camagni et al., 2015; Kaufmann and Wittwer, 2019) or borrowing size from their larger urban neighbours (see also the chapter by Meijers and Burger in this volume).

We know that innovative companies that are located in rural or peripheral contexts access external knowledge through linkages to non-local sources such as universities, other firms, competitors, etc. (Fitjar and Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Grillitsch and Nilsson, 2015). Linkages between the urban and the rural seem to be important for innovation and entrepreneurship (Mayer et al., 2016). Yet, while this literature tends to focus on the connection between the urban and the rural, it ignores the connections and linkages that actors in SMSTs form. There is scant evidence that enterprises in SMSTs form strategic relationships in order to access relevant knowledge. Meili (2019) examined five multinational corporations in SMSTs in Switzerland and compared them to domestically oriented firms in terms of their knowledge acquisition strategies. The linkages that these corporations form take on different forms such as client feedback, recruitment of national and international employees, links to research institutions and universities as well as attending fairs, conferences and workshops. The linkages constitute pipelines in global networks (Bathelt et al., 2004), yet the local buzz in the small-town is missing for these firms and there is a certain compensation strategy involved when accessing non-local sources of knowledge.

Some researchers have called the small and medium-sized context a medium-interaction environment (Doloreux and Shearmur, 2012; Meili, 2019). Such medium-interaction environments do not provide a sufficient local innovation system, which supports the creation of ideas independent of external influences. Rather, in a medium-interaction environment, local actors such as firms can easily access non-local factors of innovation because they have the competencies and connections. Yet, as Shearmur (2012, p. 126) states, there can be SMSTs that can generate local buzz, but this 'is not complemented by easy interaction with outside actors'. They stand in isolation of other (sometimes more innovative or entrepreneurial) places and their development lags behind.

There are numerous questions associated with the ability of actors in SMSTs to reach non-local sources of knowledge. One large question is related to policy and the nature of support that actors would need or would want to receive in order to access non-local sources of knowledge. How should economic development policy support external linkages? How can policy support the uptake of outside knowledge and thereby address organizational capacities of local firms in the small-town economy? Scholars of innovation and entrepreneur-

ship could study the types of network actors form to the outside versus those that they form to the local economy. Many aspects of operating a business involve connections to the local economy. Knowing more about what firms can or cannot find in the local economy in terms of partners, knowledge, inputs, etc. is important because only then can we assess to what extent innovation also leads to the development of the local economy. Another line of inquiry is related to a more comparative approach. It would be interesting to take up Shearmur's idea of medium-interaction environments and compare differently situated SMSTs. Are some more able to connect to the outside while others draw more on local buzz? In what ways does a medium-interaction environment that has a high degree of local interaction but a low degree of accessibility and connection to non-local actors change towards more interaction to the outside while at the same time keeping up the local buzz?

Going beyond patents and technology

Innovation is often considered monolithic as a dynamic that leads to new products or technologies. As a result, our perspective on innovation is biased towards new technologies that can be patented and that lead to economic growth. Yet, there is increasing evidence that the notion of innovation needs to be broadened to also include innovation processes that do not yield new products or technologies. For example, social innovations need to be considered as they can play a significant role in the development of new solutions to existing challenges. Social innovations can be defined as new forms of individual or organization cooperation that can help solve existing social challenges (Ayob et al., 2016; Tschumi et al., 2021). While there has been extensive research on the role of social innovations in rural development (Bock, 2016; Neumeier, 2012), less has been written about the role of social innovations in the SMST context. One exception is the study by Sept (2021), which shows that the membership of select SMSTs in Germany and Italy in the network of Slow Cities helped these towns to take on a different development perspective, namely one of slowing down and putting quality of life first and foremost on the agenda. Thus, the social innovation led to a revised notion of what constitutes a good life in the towns under investigation. Sept's work points towards alternative development paradigms that are brought about by innovation in social behaviour and organization, and which result in revised spatial planning visions.

A similar notion is embedded in the concept of slow innovation, which might prove to be a fruitful avenue for further research in the context of SMSTs. Slow innovation refers to innovative processes that do not depend on imme-

diate face-to-face interaction in a high-interaction (often urban) environment. Rather, slow innovation refers to innovation processes that depend on knowledge that is not time-dependent and does not lose its value rapidly. It also refers to processes that involve a lower frequency of interaction with external innovation partners and to processes that involve a strategic search for new information and knowledge. Some authors illustrate that slow innovation can be a viable process in peripheral locations as the innovation actors do not depend on high frequencies of interactions, tend to be more introverted, etc. (Shearmur, 2017; Shearmur and Doloreux, 2016). In my own work, I have explored slow innovation processes in peripheral locations in the European Alps and found that not only are knowledge generation processes 'slow', but also that 'slowness' in the sense of deceleration and the focus on meaning of work, community, etc. are important elements of innovators (Mayer, 2020).

The latter insights might point to possibilities of future studies regarding different types of innovation processes in SMSTs. Why not focus on the social meaningfulness of innovation and the driving motivation of innovative actors in SMSTs? And how about questions related to the bright and dark sides of new product and technology innovations? Given the increasing awareness about the fact that innovation dynamics may also induce negative development (Coad et al., 2021), such questions seem to be quite relevant. In addition, one might wonder to what extent non-radical, process-oriented innovation processes that occur further away from large cities (Duranton and Puga, 2001) in fact lead to more just development.

Small-town entrepreneurial ecosystems

Much of the empirical research on entrepreneurship in recent years has focused on the concept of entrepreneurial ecosystems. Entrepreneurial ecosystems can be defined as 'a set of independent actors and factors coordinated in such a way that they enable productive entrepreneurship within a particular territory' (Spigel, 2020, p. 5). It is assumed that new companies – particularly high-growth firms – benefit from a supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem in terms of a variety of factors (material, social, cultural, etc.) and that cities or regions benefit from the development of such ecosystems. Entrepreneurship is thus context-sensitive and is influenced by aspects of place and space (Stam and Welter, 2020; Welter, 2011).

How can we embrace the concept of place and space in studies of entrepreneurship in SMSTs? With the focus on entrepreneurial ecosystems, we are

able to incorporate such a contextual dimension in entrepreneurship studies. The work by Roundy (2017) is quite insightful here as he applied the entrepreneurial ecosystem concept to the small-town context. He defines a small-town entrepreneurial ecosystem as a 'community of individuals, social structures, institutions and cultural values, located in a city of limited reach, scope or size, whose interactions produce entrepreneurial activity' (Roundy, 2017, p. 240). Recognizing that small towns can host high levels of entrepreneurial activity, Roundy traces the strengths and limitations of such an ecosystem. He argues that while small towns lack a deep labour pool, their entrepreneurs find strategies to leverage non-traditional educational institutions (e.g. community and technical colleges) and they are able to attract talent from the outside due to attractive living conditions and location advantages stemming from the town's smallness. While small towns have smaller markets and thus entrepreneurs are more limited in terms of finding customers, entrepreneurial strategies engage in initiatives that try to overcome these market limitations (e.g. accessing a limited number of consumers who are nevertheless quite loyal). While networks are smaller, they may be more dense and stronger in the small towns and entrepreneurs can leverage these advantages when it comes to making important connections. Also, the entrepreneurial support infrastructure in small towns will be developed. Yet, a small-town context may offer advantages and entrepreneurs may reach outside the town into the region to access support services. Small towns can be advantageous because success stories can be communicated better and the community may be more able to quickly and more easily develop a narrative in support of entrepreneurship. While many aspects of the small-town context seem to limit entrepreneurship, Roundy turns our attention to the ways in which successful entrepreneurs may be able to leverage small-town location advantages.

While Roundy's work focuses extensively on the compensation strategies of entrepreneurs when they find themselves in the context of SMSTs, not much has been written on the ways in which entrepreneurship indeed works in SMSTs. Perhaps there are thresholds to the material, social and cultural attributes of the entrepreneurial ecosystem and perhaps these thresholds depend on the size of the urban area as well as its location in relation to other larger or smaller urban areas. One could ask whether entrepreneurial ecosystems in SMSTs also benefit from borrowing size or whether they suffer from agglomeration shadows. Connecting theories stemming from entrepreneurship studies with those from regional development and economic geography might be a promising way to go forward and overcome the theoretical limitations of the entrepreneurial ecosystems approach. Moreover, we would also be able to answer the question put forward by Malecki if the entrepreneurial ecosystem

approach is the right concept for all kinds of regions as this is far from clear (Malecki, 2018).

Conclusion

Given that innovation and entrepreneurship are important explanatory variables when it comes to studying the development of SMSTs, we must incorporate a focus on these issues in our studies of smaller urban places. This means that we take the issue of scale more seriously. Innovative and entrepreneurial actors are connected to their interlocutors at different scales and they embed their activities locally. Yet, in many cases it is unclear to what extent this embeddedness does indeed lead to local development. Analyses need to go beyond mere descriptions of the locational factors that are present or not in the SMSTs. Research would need to focus on explanations as to whether and to what extent embeddedness in the local context and connectedness to the regional, national or global scale leads to local development. In this sense, a comparative perspective is important and research would need to compare and contrast different types of SMST and going beyond the single case study (Döringer, 2020).

Deficiency-oriented conceptions of innovation and entrepreneurship in studies of SMSTs tend to overemphasize smallness as a liability and there is a widespread focus on the compensation strategies of actors in these contexts. Such perspectives may arise from an 'urban bias' that obscures the actual circumstances. These perspectives may come from a perspective on SMSTs as islands of innovation rather than nodes in networks with actors who cross different spatial scales.

Suggestions for further reading

Knox, P. and Mayer, H. 2013. *Small-town Sustainability: Economic, Social, and Environmental Innovation*. Basel: Birkhäuser.

This book conceptualizes small and medium-sized towns as resourceful and resilient places. We review small-town efforts that aim at developing alternative sustainable visions for the towns, their citizens, politicians and businesses. The underlying notion of sustainability is comprehensive and incorporates a social, ecological and economic perspective. A wealth of illustrations such

as maps and photos illustrate and convey numerous examples of small-town programmes and initiatives.

Marques, P. and Morgan, K. 2021. Innovation without regional development? The complex interplay of innovation, institutions, and development. *Economic Geography.* **97**(5), 475–496.

This paper asks the critical question why innovation activities or the presence of such does not always lead to regional development particularly in less developed contexts. The paper is very useful to scholars of small and medium-sized towns because the authors help us go beyond merely counting the number of actors in a local innovation system and focusing on the quality of capabilities of innovative and entrepreneurial actors. Through configurational theorizing (rather than correlational theorizing), they highlight the interplay between organizational capabilities and innovation outcomes or lack thereof.

Sept, A. 2021. 'Slowing down' in small and medium-sized towns: Cittaslow in Germany and Italy from a social innovation perspective. *Regional Studies, Regional Science.* **8**(1), 259–268.

Ariane Sept examines German and Italian small towns that are part of the Cittaslow movement. She utilizes the concept of social innovation to illustrate how a strategy to slow down can bring new impulses. Through her focus on a much wider notion of innovation, she is able to illustrate how in a small-town context, slowing-down strategies can work towards increased quality of life.

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7 (Re)discovering the small and medium-sized industrial town and its development potential

David Bole

Introduction

The industrial small and medium-sized town (SMST) is omnipresent in the world. Especially in Europe, where settlement patterns depend on smaller urban areas, industrial SMSTs seem to be very much alive: 27 per cent of the European population lives in SMSTs, and industrial employment is overrepresented there compared to national averages (Servillo et al., 2017). However, it seems that industrial SMSTs are not perceived as a research topic. Clancey (2004) cites reasons for this invisibility such as the research bias towards big cities and exploring only specific economic activities. The latter is related to the general shift of academia towards advanced economic activities, while industrial areas have been studied almost exclusively in terms of the inevitable decline or necessity of the transition from the late industrial to the post-industrial phase (Phelps and Ozawa, 2003). Although post-industrial transitional theories shifted attention towards cities and towns with a new service-based economy and social dynamics, the lack of scholarly attention to industrial SMSTs does not mean that they are a thing of the past or somehow frozen in time. They have survived, evolved and are an important part of certain national (Berube and Murray, 2018; Bole et al., 2019) and regional urban systems (Krzysztofik et al., 2016).

It is important to take a deeper look at industrial SMSTs for several reasons. Although SMSTs have become the subject of research in recent years, there is a need to study and address their diversity and heterogeneity (Wagner and Growe, 2021). Industrial SMSTs are one of these underresearched varieties: the analysis of the 20 most cited articles on SMST does not include a single article that specifically addresses the industrial type (Wagner and Growe, 2021). As noted above, they represent a significant part of national urban systems in terms of population size and deserve attention for this reason

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alone. In Europe, analysis has shown that they are the economic engines of some countries (Pirisi et al., 2015; Bole et al., 2020). Their historic and current economic function as centres of manufacturing, natural resource extraction or energy production (hereafter referred to as industry) is another reason to put them in focus. In this chapter, industrial SMSTs are defined as smaller urban units within specific national urban systems that currently or in the past had an industrial economic base. Being smaller, they tend to have a homogeneous sectoral structure based on either manufacturing, mining, coal extraction, oil, gas or another energy production. This inert sectoral structure and the importance of industry became a significant, if not decisive, factor in their urban development, making them very distinct from other types of urban units (Dvoryadkina and Dzhalilov, 2022).

The aim here is to summarise extant research on industrial SMSTs to identify future research gaps. First, the issue of definitions is addressed. Then, previous research on industrial SMSTs is discussed in four parts: socioeconomic performance, deindustrialisation, single-company towns and sociocultural assets. Finally, possible avenues for further research are identified and concluding remarks are made.

Questions of identification

The first inevitable question in research with industrial SMSTs is how to identify them. Like any geographical phenomenon, industrial SMSTs are spatially and temporally variable, so there is no universal definition of them. One could argue that at the beginning of any research dealing with this topic there should be an explicit definition or identification of the research object, otherwise there is a risk that theoretical and empirical research becomes blurred or fuzzy. Industrial SMSTs have usually been identified as a specific type within the functional or socioeconomic classifications of SMSTs in general. There appear to be two main approaches to defining industrial SMSTs. The first is systemic-quantitative and the second is interpretative-qualitative. Knowledge of the two general approaches is important because they construe and make sense of the object of study in different ways.

The aim of the systemic-quantitative approach is to create an inventory of homogeneous units that share similar characteristics and can then be further classified and analysed (Russo et al., 2017). First, population criteria (population size and/or density) are used to identify SMSTs, and then the employment criterion (employment in the industrial sector) is added to further distinguish

industrial SMSTs. In the TOWN study, SMSTs were defined with a population criterion of 5,000–50,000 and within them industrial towns were extracted that had at least a third of total employment in the industrial sector (Hamdouch et al., 2017). Both population and industrial employment thresholds vary in different studies. The employment criterion is sometimes defined using the national average (Bolton and Hildreth, 2013) or statistical thresholds such as standard deviation to identify the most industrial SMSTs within the urban system (Bole et al., 2019).

This systemic-quantitative approach has some significant drawbacks. First, thresholds are always arbitrary: an urban settlement with 50,000 inhabitants may be considered a small town in one country/region and a large town in another. The same applies to the threshold of industrial employment. Second, this approach ignores the importance of former industry. Recently deindustrialised towns might not meet the threshold for industrial employment and would be excluded as industrial SMSTs, although they share socioeconomic and spatial characteristics with them. To avoid this, some authors have chosen to include historical industrial employment data to include older industrial urban areas in their analyses (Berube and Murray, 2018).

The aim of the interpretative-qualitative approach is to examine case study towns in detail and in a specific context. There are two general methods for case study selection (Curtis et al., 2000). The first is *a priori* sampling, meaning that the object of the case study is predetermined by the particular research focus. For example, Lazzeroni (2020) selected three small towns that are home to a dominant company and hypothesised that they have more problems reinventing their development paths. Therefore, the research question (single-company towns have difficulties) leads to a selection of similar case studies. The second method is *grounded* sampling, where the theory emerges from the independent sample of case study towns. To illustrate, Salder and Bryson (2019) studied the entrepreneurial practices of manufacturing small and medium-sized enterprises and selected five towns as the case study sample. Although they were diverse, the analysis revealed certain common characteristics that led to new insights and theory development.

The main advantage of the interpretative-qualitative approach is that it can offer a large amount of information and provides better insights due to a small sample. The disadvantage of this approach is that the selection of case study towns usually remains 'superficial' or researchers select them based on personal familiarity rather than an extensive literature review (Krehl and Weck, 2020). For this reason, the selection of case study towns should be based on

explicit criteria that allow for a generalisation of findings, provide rich information and ideally include historically understudied towns.

The choice between these two approaches depends on the research objectives of the study. If the aim is to explore the 'scope' of industrial SMSTs, their typologies or performances, it makes sense to use the systemic-quantitative approach. If the aim is to go into 'depth' of causal processes and mechanisms, the interpretative-qualitative approach seems more appropriate. An ideal scenario for a study on industrial SMSTs could involve both approaches. For example, a typology of Swiss SMSTs (Meili and Mayer, 2017) served as a basis for the selection of case study towns and subsequent in-depth analysis (Meili, 2019).

Researchers should clearly identify industrial SMSTs in their local, regional or national urban context and avoid overly broad generalisations or reductionist definitions. A possible open research agenda is how to identify industrial SMSTs beyond population and industrial employment thresholds. Research questions include, for example: How can research include less tangible elements that define industrial SMSTs, such as industrial identity or tradition, small town mentality, etc.? Where do we draw the line between an industrial and a post-industrial town, especially in today's world where industry is combined with specialised services in hybrid forms (Industry 4.0)? Where do we draw the line between rural industrial areas, industrial SMSTs and larger urban areas? In short, there is a need to further define the nature of industrial SMSTs and explore the elements that set them apart from other types of industrialised urban or rural areas.

Socioeconomic performance and transformations

From a structural perspective, industrial SMSTs are considered resistant to change, as their long-standing industrial specialisation tends to be self-replicating and self-reinforcing, limiting new innovations and leading to negative path dependency and various lock-ins (Hassink, 2010; Ženka et al., 2015). The agglomeration effect is also often mentioned, where not only the economic structure but also the size of industrial SMSTs are perceived as unfavourable. Due to their small population size (Combes et al., 2012) and low diversity of cognitively related industries (or low related variety), they are less likely to benefit from their size and diversity (Isaksen and Karlsen, 2013). Smaller towns often depend on a single large firm or are often extremely specialised in one economic activity and therefore vulnerable to internal and

external economic shocks (Ženka et al., 2019). They are also less able to absorb external knowledge (Duranton and Puga, 2001).

From the abovementioned accounts one can deduce that industrial SMSTs have inherent structural disadvantages that lead to poorer socioeconomic performance. However, the empirical evidence is ambiguous. A sample of 39 SMSTs in northern Italy showed that industrial towns face poorer job growth and are more prone to economic crises (Clerici, 2020). Ženka et al. (2015) found a generally positive relationship between the share of manufacturing employment and economic performance in Czech non-metropolitan microregions with an average population of 42,000, noting that older industrial microregions with a dominant single industrial firm tend to have high per capita value added. In Slovenia, the socioeconomic performance of industrial SMSTs (population from 15,000 to 60,000) was compared to their non-industrial counterparts. No statistically significant variations were found in terms of economic structure or demographics, the only statistically significant difference being lower commuting rates in industrial towns (Bole et al., 2020). The classification showed that the majority of industrial SMSTs had a strong economic performance and that only three out of 23 towns could be labelled as disadvantaged (Bole et al., 2019). In Switzerland, a detailed study of the economic and development characteristics of SMSTs revealed that the industrial type is not homogeneous, but should be further distinguished into high tech or low tech according to their innovation performance (Meili and Mayer, 2017). Low-tech towns have lower employment rates in contrast to growing high-tech towns, but both types exhibit less intensive commuting linkages, similar to the Slovenian example, implying that industrial SMSTs are more isolated (Meili and Mayer, 2017). Evidence from SMSTs in the United States points to the same conclusion that the presence of industry does not negatively affect socioeconomic performance. However, the presence of new, high-value industrial production suggests that they are more likely to have a positive socioeconomic trajectory (Hobor, 2013).

An interesting question is also that of the geography of industrial SMSTs in the urban system. Although it is generally acknowledged that peripheral location represents a weakness for the development of SMSTs (Crescenzi, 2005), in Slovenia the most peripherally located industrial SMSTs also tend to have a successful economic performance with a specialised and clustered local labour market (Bole et al., 2019). Perhaps their peripheral geographic location can play to their strength, as they are too far from metropolitan areas to commute daily or develop a light residential economy and are therefore forced to improve their competitiveness by developing economic niches. The peripheral location and small size have in some cases proved conducive to new

developments, such as Jutland, Denmark, where the locational disadvantage forced firms to adopt flexible production practices and industry-specific localisation economies with a distinct entrepreneurial culture (Hansen, 1991). This success of certain peripheral industrial towns raises further questions: What is the role of local agency and policy (thereby addressing the principle of territorial autonomy) and what is the role of regional and national policies and embeddedness in wider territorial structures (referring to regional determinism)? The principles of territorial autonomy and regional determinism (Kaufmann and Wittwer, 2019) might prove useful in explaining why certain towns with an 'unfavourable' location excel in their economic performance.

Evolutionary explanations of industrial transformation are abundant in economic geography. Grillitsch and Asheim (2018), for example, identify three main types of industrial change: path upgrading where new innovations or business models are introduced; path diversification, in which new industries emerge from related or unrelated knowledge; and path emergence, in which a new industry is founded by unrelated or external actors. However, there is a lack of research that would link these economic development pathways to the general socioeconomic transformation of industrial towns. Evolutionary explanations focus on the economic actors and economic development, often failing to relate them to broader urban development. Therefore, we need to know how industrial (economic) change is reflected in the political, social, environmental, spatial and cultural dynamics of industrial towns and what causal relationships exist between them.

The above research may point to several unexplored research topics. It appears that, at least in some countries, the development paths of industrial SMSTs are comparable to those of other types of town. This result could be due to a limited amount of research, but it could also have other implications. For example, it could indicate that industrial towns are a heterogeneous group and should be studied by specific types of industry, such as low/high tech, to identify their different development paths. It could also mean that the academic narrative of lagging old traditional industrial towns is largely obsolete and that more effort should be made to understand their competitiveness and development paths in a contemporary context. Relevant questions could relate, for example, to processes of automation and tertiarisation of traditional industries, which induce changes in technological and societal processes that can combine existing manufacturing knowledge with new technological systems such as the Internet of Things (Industry 4.0).

Deindustrialisation, shrinkage and places left behind

Perhaps much of the negative generalisation about industrial SMSTs stems from the fact that deindustrialisation has adversely affected them, although there is evidence that this has happened to a lesser extent than in larger cities. An analysis of European regions found that metropolitan and rural regions were largely deindustrialised, while intermediate regions, where SMSTs dominate, retained above-average industrial employment (Hoekstra et al., 2017). Reports of deindustrialisation in SMSTs in France paint a familiar picture for the Global North: from 1975 to 2016, SMSTs lost 57.8 per cent of industrial jobs, in most cases accompanied by socioeconomic and demographic shrinkage (Gros-Balthazard and Talandier, 2020). Industrial towns in post-socialist countries were particularly at risk, as they were dependent on one major industrial company and the abrupt deindustrialisation in the 1990s brought devastating urban changes (Pirisi et al., 2015; Popescu, 2014). Deindustrialisation and the shift from manufacturing to services has been mentioned as one of the main triggers for urban shrinkage, as tertiarisation left deep scars by forsaking certain achievements of the industrial age, such as collective wage setting and the welfare state (failed tertiarisation effect) (Gornig and Goebel, 2016).

The collapse of the industrial economic base gave rise to studies on urban shrinkage as a long-term, adverse process of economic, demographic and spatial decline. Industrial SMSTs received particular attention in the context of shrinkage, especially if they specialised in mining, steel, ports or textile industries (Wolff and Wiechman, 2017). It has been theorised that, in addition to their unfavourable economic structure, they can rarely compensate with research or education infrastructures and that absorbing unemployed workers is more difficult due to the small labour market (Fol and Cunningham-Sabot, 2010). These processes have been confirmed by studies from specific countries. In Romania, industrial towns are generally experiencing population decline and loss of urban functions due to lower birth rates and mass out-migration to nearby rural and larger urban areas or through emigration abroad (Cercleux et al., 2019). Older industrial towns in the United Kingdom also had negative natural increases of the workforce and increased out-commuting to larger regional centres (Beatty and Fothergill, 2020). Mayer and Greenberg (2001) found that policy makers in shrinking industrial SMSTs in the United States are poorly responsive, often taking more than a decade to react with a plan or action for economic diversification.

Socioeconomic decline and demographic shrinkage, coupled with inadequate policy responses, have led to many deindustrialising SMSTs being seen as

places that are being 'left behind' (Goodwin and Heath, 2016) or experiencing peripheralisation, i.e. uneven and unjust development by being perceived in regional policy as backward places that can never win in competition with other urban areas (Wirth et al., 2016). These perceptions and attitudes can have concrete political impacts in structurally vulnerable places such as deindustrialised SMSTs. Rodríguez-Pose (2018) mentions 'places that don't matter', where communities with long-term, industrial decline 'take revenge' for years of neglect or misleading neoliberal policies by a surge in populist votes. These anti-establishment votes are particularly noted in 'older, working-class, white voters … that are required to adapt and prosper amid the modern, postindustrial economy' (Goodwin and Heath, 2016, p. 325). Other research has shown that even well-performing industrial SMSTs exhibit an above-average share of populist votes, for example Slovenia (Bole et al., 2020) or the United Kingdom (Hoekstra et al., 2017).

Several unexplored themes can be identified in this strand of literature. Post-industrial transformation in SMSTs is poorly understood and it is often unclear why certain towns with similar assets and histories have such different development paths. The main question here is: What are the reasons for the continuing decline of some industrial SMSTs, and why have others survived and continued to grow? There is a need for cross-national comparative research, as most studies on deindustrialisation have been conducted at the level of a single country (Pike, 2020). In studying shrinking industrial SMSTs, very little is known about their coping mechanisms. Pike's (2020) suggestion to go beyond the gross domestic product agenda and explore emerging concepts such as inclusive growth, localised capabilities and a foundational economy seems very timely for industrial SMSTs. There is also the question of how these towns cope with the new neoliberal economy where stable industrial employment and collective wage setting is being replaced by precarious, low-paid, informal or 'flexible' employment and labour market deregulation (Anand and Dey, 2021).

Resilience and single-company towns

Although studies emphasise the economic limitations of industrial SMSTs there is a growing literature on their importance to the regional/national economy and the coping mechanisms that enable them to survive and function. The concept of 'hidden champions', i.e. highly successful, export- and niche-oriented companies that are often family run and less known to the public, focused on the positive aspects of industrial SMSTs, as it was found

in Germany that these companies are disproportionately located in smaller towns, where due to mutual dependence employees have a 'sense of identification and avoidance of confrontations' (Simon, 2009, p. 272). This sparked interest in exploring innovation and benefits of the periphery (outside larger cities). Companies there have been found to rely more on a strong endogenous knowledge base and strategic relations with customers, universities and suppliers to guarantee the influx of external knowledge, coupled with high worker loyalty and the protection of tacit knowledge (Eder and Trippl, 2019).

An analogue to hidden champion towns is research on the adaptability and resilience of single-company or single-industry towns, especially in former planned economies (Commander, 2018). In Hungary, the single-company town was identified as a particular type, where a successfully transformed industrial company has a huge impact far beyond the town's border (Pirisi et al., 2015). In Slovenia, the predominant type of industrial SMST is the 'post-socialist champion town', where a single company has made a successful transition from labour-intensive to medium- and high-tech production (Bole et al., 2019). In both countries, single-industry towns are the export engines of the economy. However, little is known about the factors behind their success. One study suggests that dominant firms benefit from their strong influence on the limited labour market and provide more compensatory benefits (housing, education, childcare) to workers to encourage their loyalty and retention (Commander, 2018). In Central-East Europe, sustained industrialisation of peripheral industrial towns is further explained by the role of central states, which aim to control local assets and resources by exerting regulative control over them (Nagy et al., 2021). It has also been found that high industrial specialisation promotes their good economic performance (Ženka et al., 2015) and that they rely heavily on endogenous resources and actors (Gunko et al., 2021). Small urban size can promote new high-tech industries and Industry 4.0, as in the case of small industrial towns in Spain's 'Toy Valley'. The high specialisation and small size allow for frequent interaction between innovators and companies and facilitate collective actions such as living labs and other forms of experimentation (Hervás-Oliver, 2021). A similar case was found in the French town of Vierzon, where a small social network and homophily were found to increase the chances of interaction between entrepreneurs and institutions, cementing their mutual trust (Morisson and Mayer, 2021).

Adding to the resilient nature of some industrial SMSTs are also non-economic factors, which can influence their development models. A study of three small industrial towns highlighted the importance of institutions and their actors in creating new pathways (Lazzeroni, 2020). If the economic and non-economic actors of the local community are collectively able to escape the trap of

industrial nostalgia and use their local assets for complementary activities (Industry 4.0, tourism), they can better adapt to external changes. Similarly, Gwosdz et al. (2020) identify so-called localised capabilities, which are a result of historical development and industrial characteristics entailing attitudes, skills, behaviour, the quality of local institutions, etc. that are conducive to new development paths in industrial towns.

Most of the evidence from the above studies consider the industrial town perspective as more of a background context and do not attempt to explain whether there are causal mechanisms between specific assets and actors in industrial SMSTs and their performance. To date, there is little research on the inherent qualities or competitive advantages of industrial small towns compared to other types of places. As hidden champion or single-company towns are ubiquitous, there is currently a lack of research on their specific local innovation systems, compensation strategies, use of territorial assets, etc. that could translate into policies for other, less successful types of industrial SMST. Furthermore, little is known about industrial transformation on the town scale, i.e. from low to high tech, green restructuring, sustainability transitions, etc.

Sociocultural assets

Much of the existing research attempts to understand the strengths and weaknesses of former and current industrial SMSTs through the perspective of economic development. And although such explanations sometimes involve non-economic assets or actors (e.g. Lazzeroni, 2020), they usually treat social and cultural factors as an add-on to economic factors. The sociocultural perspective is partly tackled in institutional theory, where values, norms, habits, attitudes, culture, etc. form so-called soft institutions that mobilise resources and activate actors to trigger new development (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). In evolutionary economic geography, the history of industrialisation can be reflected in specific cultures that either restrict new development (developmental conservatism, rigid gender relations, cultures of dependency) or enable it (leveraging industrial skill base or knowledge for new development) (Bole, 2021).

Industrial heritage is probably the most commonly identified asset in industrial towns. These are tangible remnants of older industrial production, such as industrial sites, buildings and landscapes, which are commonly converted for tourism use (Bosák et al., 2018) or other forms of brownfield development (Kantor-Pietraga et al., 2021; Marot and Harfst, 2021). However, Görmar

and Harfst (2019) caution that this may be too narrow an understanding of what industrial culture can offer, and that intangible aspects are even more important for new path development. Industrial culture can foster neoindustrial development, for example by upgrading traditional industrial skills, innovation cultures or artisanal production. This is a viable model, especially for smaller towns where flexible, family-run businesses can benefit from being embedded in the local community, local clusters and networks (Pipan, 2018). Industrial culture can also create links between traditional industrial sectors and the creative industries (Harfst et al., 2018). Huggins and Thompson (2021) also note that atomised behavioural and cultural environments enjoy better productivity, which could also explain the resilient nature of single-company or hidden champion towns in particular.

Sociocultural aspects of industrial towns also have a reach beyond economic development. Kozina et al. (2021) mention how embedded industrial values of a mid-sized town, such as comradery and volunteering, fostered inclusive urban governance and diverse social innovations that made the town more resilient. Yet there seems to be a clash regarding the identity of industrial towns. Existing research documents that industrial towns and cities deploy reimagining strategies to create a new post-industrial identity, especially addressed to outsiders and investors. The problem, however, is that the new post-industrial image is often at odds with the identity of the inhabitants, who usually have a more positive attitude towards their industrial tradition (Bole et al., 2022; Hakala et al., 2020). Values associated with the Fordist industry (regularity of work, strong control of the state, separation of work and leisure, etc.) do not seem to fit the dominant neoliberal narratives of economic development – such as flexibility, precarity, weak state, merging of work and leisure – which is the reason why certain industrial towns resist new development initiatives, as the industrial values of the local community do not match the global ones. This conflict is documented in case studies of industrial SMSTs, for example in Norway (Cruickshank et al., 2013) and Finland (Häyrynen and Semi, 2019).

Sociocultural context is an important component of local and regional development studies. It is also the least empirically developed. Industrial SMSTs are a good polygon for studies that emphasise the social and cultural aspects of industry and its role in development. In particular, the intangible aspects of industrial culture could be studied more: the role of specific industrial values that could improve social services and quality of life (social innovations based on industrial values); the specific company cultures in smaller towns (worker loyalty, the role of workers' unions); the cultural features that cause lock-ins (culture of patriarchy and masculinity, culture of resistance to new ideas or

development conservatism); and the dynamics of industrial heritage valuation (recognition, conservation and enhancement of past industrial knowledge and skills). These studies are particularly important for policy makers, since importing development paradigms from larger service-based urban environments, such as the knowledge economy or creative industries, may not match the expectations or capacities of industrial SMSTs.

Conclusion

The aim here is to highlight possible new and exciting avenues of research that would add to the body of knowledge on the development of industrial SMSTs. The premise is that we should know more about their limitations on the one hand and their development opportunities on the other. Based on the research overview, it is possible to present a future research agenda that points out important topics that have not yet been sufficiently researched (Table 7.1). I propose that the agenda should focus on three main thematic areas. The first could examine the development trajectories of industrial towns, focusing not only on their misfortunes but also on the conditions for their success, transformation and continued resilience. Here, notions of reindustrialisation of SMSTs are particularly underresearched, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of the Global North in terms of missing production capacities for vital medical equipment and other goods. The second thematic area could address towns that have gone through the process of deindustrialisation and are facing dire socioeconomic and political consequences. The research should aim to provide a solid basis for equitable and place-specific policy making where deindustrialised small towns eventually become 'places that matter'. Given the insights presented so far, it would be valuable that the last thematic area explores the less obvious but highly important sociocultural facets of industrial SMSTs, as they have the potential to tap into new and exciting development opportunities.

The proposal focuses on specific topics rather than theoretical approaches, which can range from institutional, evolutionary to agency-based. The emphasis is on socioeconomic development, but it should be acknowledged that there are facets of industrial SMST development that are not mentioned here, such as spatial, social, political and environmental development issues and more specific economic perspectives, like firm structure, entrepreneurship, etc. Additionally, the issues of identifying industrial SMSTs could also be addressed by introducing vigorous empirical methods and combining quantitative and qualitative approaches at different levels and in different territories.

Table 7.1   Topics for a future research agenda on the development of industrial SMSTs

Socioeconomic performance/resilience/ single-company towns	Deindustrialisation/shrinkage/inequality	Sociocultural assets
– Diversity/heterogeneity and classifications	– Failed tertiarisation and the labour shift from manufacturing to services	– Use of tangible and intangible industrial culture in local development (besides only tourism)
– Economic performance by specific types of industry	– Changes in the labour market and job quality (precariousness)	– Upgrading traditional and artisanal industrial skill base in neoindustrial development
– Factors and causalities influencing better/ worse performance or resilience	– Smart shrinkage, regeneration of brownfield sites and excess infrastructure	– Social innovations based on industrial values
– Coupling industrial transformation (path upgrading/diversification/emergence) with socioeconomic transformation	– Endogenous and specific policies focused on people and places	– The role of local industrial culture on specific company practices
– Regional determinism versus territorial autonomy in local development	– Rise of populism and discontent, peripheralisation of industrial towns in research and policy	– Destruction or modification of cultural assets that hinder new development (culture of dependency, patriarchy, etc.)
– Specific innovation processes (compensation strategies, local/sectorial innovation systems)	– Attraction and retention of specific groups (youth, creative workers) and specific economic actors	– The identity and branding conflict (industrial identity versus post-industrial policies and town branding)
– The phenomenon of single-company towns, their specialisation and vulnerability	– Reframing development beyond only economy (inclusive growth, localised capabilities, foundational economy)	
– Socioeconomic transitions (e.g. green restructuring in mining towns, etc.)	– Cross-national comparative case study research on deindustrialisation and coping mechanisms	
– Urban manufacturing revival and urban sustainability		

The main message is that further research should aim to understand the existence and evolution of industrial SMSTs, rather than merely using them as context or a background for exploring specific processes.

Acknowledgements

Suggestions for further reading

Hobor, G. 2013. Surviving the era of deindustrialization: The new economic geography of the urban rust belt. *Journal of Urban Affairs*. **35**(4), 417–434.

This article presents a detailed typology of industrial areas in the Rust Belt in the United States and examines their socioeconomic performance. It describes two types of industrial towns (older and newer) that have shown positive socioeconomic trajectories and the possible reasons for their surprising success. The article is particularly interesting because it presents a solid quantitative approach to classifying industrial SMSTs and includes not only current but also historical data in the analysis.

Kozina, J., Bole, D. and Tiran, J. 2021. Forgotten values of industrial city still alive: What can the creative city learn from its industrial counterpart? *City, Culture and Society*. **25**, e100395.

This article presents industrial towns as an alternative concept to a contemporary creative-based urban model that follows the neoliberal development paradigm. The concept of industrial towns can bring in 'older' but still relevant development dynamics such as the role of collective action, social innovation, welfare, etc. The article casts a more positive light on industrial towns, highlighting their industrial character as an advantage rather than an obstacle to development.

Pike, A. 2020. Coping with deindustrialization in the Global North and South. *International Journal of Urban Sciences*. **26**(1), 1–22.

Although not directly related to industrial SMSTs, this article outlines future studies of (de)industrialised areas in the Global North and South and sets out theoretical and methodological principles that could be experimented by scholars in small industrial towns (i.e. studying the foundational economy, community wealth building, etc.). The article is important because it refocuses attention on theorising and understanding deindustrialisation rather than just documenting it.

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8   Cultural tourism as a tool for transformation in small and medium-sized towns

Chiara Rabbiosi and Dimitri Ioannides

Introduction

Tourism scholars regularly extol the merits of tourism as a tool for economic diversification in small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs), especially those with a narrow economic base, which witness chronic social problems like high unemployment and rapid depopulation. In recent years there have been numerous case studies of tourism's role in communities, especially those in predominantly rural and/or peripheral regions (Ioannides and Timothy, 2010; Lane, 1994; Scherf, 2021). Strangely enough, despite this research attention, most writings fail to clearly define what is precisely meant by SMSTs. For instance, some authors who write about tourism in small-town America focus on extremely small places (e.g., ones with populations under 5,000) (Davis and Morais, 2004). Others refer to SMSTs as ones whose populations range between 5,000 and 50,000 (Pecsek, 2016). Then there are those who consider towns that are even larger such as Della Lucia et al. (2017), who focused on Trento and Lecce in Italy, which respectively have populations of around 115,000 and 95,000.

What emerges from most academic writings on tourism in SMSTs is that rather than focus on the population of the communities under investigation, they treat them as ones located beyond the sphere of influence of a country's major metropolitan regions and secondary cores of economic and political power. Often, these SMSTs are in the midst of rural and/or peripheral regions. They also tend to be those that, at least traditionally, depend on a narrow range of economic activities (see for example, Remoaldo et al., 2020). Thus, in this chapter, rather than becoming bogged down in precise statistical definitions of what constitutes an SMST, the subjects of our investigation are towns and cities located on the lower end of a country's rank–size order. Importantly, these are places where tourism features as a dominant sector whose impacts

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(both positive and negative) spread widely throughout the community. Of course, tourism is also a key industry in major metropolitan regions like Paris or Barcelona, but because of these cities' size and economic and political power the sector constitutes one part of a highly diversified economic base. In our study, the places we have in mind are ones where tourism, particularly cultural tourism, has become a vital part of their raison d'être and whose effects are widespread throughout the community.

Undoubtedly, there exists a broad range of such SMSTs. Seaside localities, pilgrimage centres, mountain resorts and spa towns immediately jump out as popular venues for visitors. Many of these boast a long history as destinations (Ioannides and Timothy, 2010; Walton, 1983). Additional types of SMSTs that lure tourists include gateway communities to national parks or wilderness areas, quaint rural communities, places with a rich historical heritage reflected through their built environment or those where a famous person or persons once lived. Further, there is an increasing number of SMSTs seeking to promote the arts or their culinary heritage, while events and festivals are popular in several localities as a means of attracting visitor spending (Kresl and Ietri, 2016; Scherf, 2021).

An important transformation that has occurred over the last 30 years or so is that the boundaries between leisure-related tourism and everyday life have gradually blurred. Since the 1990s, major cultural, political-economic and societal changes have been mirrored by a growing plurality of tourists' interests. The resort town for the purposes of 'simple leisure' – Rimini in Italy or Blackpool in the United Kingdom are the archetypical examples – no longer seemed to be enough. For many, though perhaps not all, the concept of a holiday began shifting towards an idea of personal growth and self-fulfilment to be reached in multiple ways. Through an immersive experience of places, no matter how distant from home nor how 'authentic' they are, individuals began hoping to achieve these traits (Uriely, 2005).

The social and cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity in tourism (Minca and Oakes, 2006; Urry, 1990) has also been paralleled by a major political-economic shift, whereby urban economies of all sizes must contend with deindustrialization or the loss in importance of an extractive activity (Mosedale, 2016). During these times, where neoliberalism has shaped the futures of places and people (Harvey, 2013), localities have been fiercely competing to attract footloose capital. In this game there are winners and losers (Cochrane, 2007; Rossi and Vanolo, 2012). Whereas the fortunes of larger metropolitan regions have varied because of differences in their respective comparative and competitive advantages, this shift has been particularly

critical for many SMSTs worldwide. Company towns, which experienced the shutdown of a factory, an agricultural processing plant or a mine, ended up losing their major economic source and were forced to reinvent themselves despite facing numerous obstacles and a weak competitive environment compared to other localities. For many such places, tourism emerged as a perceived panacea, offering hopes of economic revival and diversification (Bell and Jayne, 2006; Kresl and Ietri, 2016; Lorentzen and Van Heur, 2012). While some communities could capitalize on their proximity to natural amenities (e.g., coasts or pristine mountain regions) or their historical assets, most were forced to creatively reinvent themselves. Attracting so-called cultural tourists has often been seen as the way forward for many such places (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990; Pasquinelli and Bellini, 2017; Richards, 1996).

In this chapter, we describe the transformation in recent decades of SMSTs into cultural tourist destinations. First, we dig into literature primarily from urban studies and tourism research. Next, we define what is meant by cultural tourism, a problematic concept despite its recent success. We suggest that a way to better understand cultural tourism and SMSTs is by locating the topic at the crossroads of the cultural economy approach (Amin and Thrift, 2004) with urban geography. Correspondingly, we discuss some of the principal features characterizing contemporary SMSTs that have become cultural tourism destinations. Cultural tourism and SMSTs can also be understood by examining their role in wider urban networks. We demonstrate this through a short review of regional, macro-regional and transnational policies.

Although the narrative of cultural tourism as a tool for regenerating SMSTs in response to contemporary global challenges is well established, we express scepticism about embracing it as an unproblematic formula. We reflect our doubts by summarizing the unwanted side effects of tourism-led development. Importantly, we highlight how the limits of the strategy, which pursues cultural tourists, have become palpable during the global COVID-19 pandemic, which began in early 2020. By reflecting on the implications of the global pandemic for SMSTs we propose a future research agenda.

Thinking about cultural tourism: definitional challenges

Smith (2003, p. 29) describes cultural tourism as 'an umbrella term for a range of tourism typologies and diverse activities which have a cultural focus'. The problem with her definition is that it is difficult to pinpoint what the 'cultural focus' of cultural tourism entails. Traditionally, observers have accepted that

practising cultural tourism includes visiting specific cultural attractions (e.g., museums, heritage sites and archaeological monuments) or attending artistic performances, concerts and festivals (Richards, 1996). In recent years, the 'cultural focus' of cultural tourism has significantly broadened, although, from an epistemological point of view, it has also been increasingly criticized (Smith, 2003). For Réau and Cousin (2009), tourism eminently constitutes a distinctive sphere. In sociology, the term pinpoints the realm made up of a set of practices through which one group of people remarks on its differences from another group (Bourdieu, 1984). After all, common definitions of cultural tourism implicitly restrict their cultural focus towards highbrow cultural expressions and authorized heritage discourse, privileged monumentality and grand narratives, in the understanding that the value of artefacts and sites is intrinsic, objective and tied to time, depth and scientific or expert judgement often based on aesthetic concerns (Smith, 2006).

For 50 years or so, however, the concept of 'cultural tourism' has been increasingly juxtaposed with that of 'mass tourism' thanks to a discursive repositioning initiated by several international organizations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Council of Monuments and Sites and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (Cousin, 2008). Thus, today, whereas mass tourism conveys images of crowds of ill-behaved tourists who impose mostly negative impacts on the destinations they visit, cultural tourism implies an ideal global mobility embodying supposedly good forms of tourism. Perceptions that this form of tourism is low impact are used to legitimize cultural tourism's development (Cousin, 2008).

Regarding the scope of cultural tourism, we refer to the fact that common definitions overemphasize the consumption of arts and heritage in their narrowest sense (e.g., visiting museums, monuments and theatres). An initial critique of this narrow definition of cultural tourism derives from writings concerning the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), which stress that 'cultural tourism is as much based on experiencing as it is on sight-seeing' (Smith, 2003, p. 30). This critique is reinforced by the emerging refocusing of tourism as an encounter, relationship and negotiation within the symbolic/cultural domain in tourist destinations, which nurture a 'creative turn' in tourism (Richards, 2014). This draws from the debate in urban studies on creative cities (Florida, 2005; Landry and Bianchini, 1995). Yet the creative turn in tourism also hints at a restructuring of the processes of place making, criticizing mainstream practices of development of 'tourist places' (i.e., places and products that are meaningful for tourists or that attract tourist consumption), which unavoidably lead to a stereotyped and banal landscape (and experiences of it)

(Russo and Richards, 2016a, p. 5). The case studies provided by Scherf (2021) pinpoint six general themes, summarizing the relationship between creative tourism and 'smaller communities' (a term preferred to the one of SMSTs by the curator of the book): (1) the co-creation of experiences that feature unique local skills and knowledge by visitors and residents; (2) the engagement of visitor imagination by participation in tangible or intangible endogenous culture; (3) the generation or regeneration of sustainable cultural development for the host community; (4) the formation of creative networks to offer touristic experiences; (5) the examination of the processes, policies and methodologies around creative tourism; and (6) the creative representation of smaller communities. This means that the focus of creative tourism in SMSTs is more on the target of a tourist experience, shifting from specific objects and places to the actors of the cultural landscape they represent, including the residents. Consider Stoke-on-Trent that is not only the town where the book on *Urban Experience beyond the Metropolis* (Bell and Jayne, 2006) originated, but also the self-designated capital of pottery. Once there, visiting a pottery-making atelier which utilizes materials from the surroundings and observing the gestures of workers who create their art in a studio setting might be more attractive than visiting the pottery museum.

One way to understand cultural tourism while escaping its problematic narrow definition is to frame it in relation to major political-economic changes, with particular reference to the so-called cultural economy. This approach is especially fruitful for conceptualizing how value chains have been reconfigured in the last four decades, from production to consumption (Amin and Thrift, 2004). Cultural industries based on the mass commodification of culture have breathed fresh life into the economy, through new markets in leisure, media, arts, music, books and indeed tourism. These markets have created new forms of enterprise and played a major role in the economic regeneration of many localities throughout the world. This phenomenon has been evident in several major cities but also smaller communities worldwide, where industrial heritage sites have been reconfigured into spaces of cultural consumption for the purposes of attracting visitors (Hoffman et al., 2003).

In this context, a wider expression of material (including fashion, design and gastronomy) but also digital culture (e.g., video games) has emerged as an integral part of Western economic sectors. These have led to the designation of cultural and creative industries (Pratt, 1997). This 'industrial approach' focusing on the spatialized production of culture (Pratt, 2004) can be integrated with a 'territorial approach' (Lazzeroni et al., 2013; Santagata, 2010), highlighting the role that local assets may play in maintaining a set of intangible resources and socio-cultural relationships (such as passion, affective

components, moral sentiments, tacit awareness, trust). This means that cultural and creative industries are entangled with place as shown in the example of Stoke-on-Trent. Another case may be Cremona in Italy, one of the most famous production sites of violins for centuries. In 1996, the *Consorzio Liutai Antonio Stradivari* was launched, followed by the 'Cremona Liuteria' brand in 2000. In 2012 UNESCO recognized the arts of luthiers in the list of intangible heritage, recognizing the link between the place and violin making (Battilani, 2018). Next, we discuss this 'territorial' aspect as a particular 'plus' for SMSTs which emerge as cultural tourist destinations.

Benchmarking models and networking policies for cultural tourism in SMSTs

The success of certain SMSTs as cultural and creative tourist destinations has generated a circuit of policy mobility, meaning the transfer and local adjustment of successful policy initiatives from one place to another in an attempt to emulate a similar degree of success (Temenos and McCann, 2013). We increasingly note the trickle down of initiatives, which are often spawned in larger metropolitan centres, down the urban hierarchy. Notable is the 'Guggenheim effect' seen when the Basque town of Bilbao rebranded itself from a manufacturing centre into a focal point for the arts following a massive culture-led urban generation intervention in the 1990s (González, 2011). This Guggenheim example prompted the copycat phenomenon whereby 'star-architects' are invited to add flare to urban landscapes since architecture is also a cultural tourism theme (Ebejer, 2021). Some SMSTs have been tempted to increase their urban distinctiveness by developing a contemporary architecture landmark, even if this is disconnected from its surroundings. Salerno, a medium-sized Italian coastal town with an ancient history, began to redevelop its maritime terminal and surrounding area through two important sequential projects announced approximately a decade ago. The maritime terminal was designed by the acclaimed international architect Zaha Hadid (inaugurated in 2016), while the Spanish architect Ricardo Bofill was commissioned to design the nearby promenade and square. Civic associations critiqued the latter's project (named 'the Crescent') for its environmental impact. After a long legal battle, the project was partially modified (Pirone, 2017).

The Guggenheim phenomenon suggests yet another policy mobility, namely the tendency to replicate (at least to a degree) successful museums and cultural centres in other places, including SMSTs. This is not just a matter of imitating a successful model. Rather, the mobility strategy is based on the premise that

the project's success depends on local adjustment and social-economic embeddedness. For example, in 2010 the second Centre Pompidou was inaugurated in Metz with the aim to improve the cultural facilities offered in a disadvantaged region. This resulted while pursuing a decentralization strategy given that, traditionally, Paris has very much dominated in terms of French cultural offerings. A study by Krauss (2015) reveals that while the Centre Pompidou-Metz quickly developed a certain degree of embeddedness in the cultural networks of the region, this was not the case with regard to the economic actors. Soon after the new museum opened, most of the region's firms were unable to make significant use of the spaces of interaction offered by the centre for their networking. It is worth noting that, thus far, the only measurable direct impact on economic behaviour and activity relates to tourism-oriented economic sectors (Krauss, 2015).

Undoubtedly, successful cases may serve as the best practice inspiration for cultural and creative tourism projects in other localities. Such projects are also heavily boosted by specific cultural-political bodies, including UNESCO. The UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UNCCN) was launched in 2004 to promote cooperation among cities regardless of their size. This has certainly influenced several SMSTs, which are included in the network. Cities are awarded the UNCCN label when creativity – grouped as crafts and folk art, design, film, gastronomy, literature, media arts and music – constitutes a major factor in their development. Membership can be used as a branding tool in the framework of local communication strategies. These, in turn, serve to attract investors and tourists, and to work jointly with cities in the network to build a stronger identity based on effective results through cooperation activities (Rosi, 2014). Although UNCCN includes certain major metropolitan areas and large cities, the current list of 246 places includes several SMSTs. One is the already mentioned town of Cremona, while another example is the Swedish town of Östersund. Located in the sparsely populated county of Jämtland, this is described on the UNCCN website as:

> Östersund, UNESCO City of Gastronomy, is widely appreciated for its gastronomic culture, based on local sustainable food inspired from longstanding culinary traditions. Bringing together and supporting small entrepreneurs and farmers, Eldrimner, the Swedish National Centre for Small Scale Artisan Food Processing, provides guidance and supports training and product development demonstrating the importance of gastronomy in relation to the creative industries. The city's culinary tradition is intimately linked to its natural surroundings and the region's sustainable development efforts. (Creative Cities Network, 2022)

This community functions as the main market for agricultural products from the surrounding region and the symbiotic arrangement improves links

between town and country. Overall, tourism together with a rapidly expanding creative sector, including activities such as music, the performing arts and software design, have contributed to an annual growth of 5–10 per cent of Östersund and its surroundings (Creative Cities Network, 2022).

Several additional local development policies, which might not specifically address SMSTs, may, nevertheless, apply to many such communities. These local development policies are inspired by the networking and transnationalism put forth within the cultural policy context. For instance, there is the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme, whereby candidate cities develop a cultural programme aimed at emphasizing and leveraging upon the diversity and richness of European cultures. Increasingly, this involves the participation and 'co-creation' of culture as a form of community involvement (Nagy, 2018). While the ECoC is not explicitly a tourism-led project, the programme can be considered a tourism-related action. A tourism plan and the involvement of tourism stakeholders in the ECoC application is a success factor of candidate cities (Pasquinelli and Bellini, 2017). The ECoC programme was initially launched in 1985 and, since then, has been awarded to more than 60 cities. In the last decade, many European cultural capitals have been SMSTs. The choice of medium-sized towns such as Guimarães (Portugal) and Maribor (Slovenia) in 2012 or Rijeka (Croatia) and Galway (Ireland) in 2020/2021 reflects an effort to support cities and regions beyond the most famous European cultural and tourist cores.

Yet another programme, which specifically addresses cultural tourism, involves the European Cultural Routes (ECRs). ECRs are promoted as part of the European Union tourism policy in cooperation with the Council of Europe, the European Travel Commission, UNWTO and other international partners, which contribute to the development of ECRs via specific actions (European Commission, 2022). While the European Union perceives cultural routes as a means to promote lesser known destinations, particularly in rural regions, the most famous of these programmes, namely the Council of Europe Cultural Routes programme, aims to use tourism to achieve cultural Europeanization and human rights. Often, the nodes connected by extended routes are SMSTs. In the case of the *Camino de Santiago*, which in 1987 was designated the first Cultural Route of the Council of Europe, the route has promoted tourism not only to Santiago de Compostela, but also to several other smaller towns including León, Astorga and Sarria (González and Medina, 2003).

Maintaining a critical approach towards tourism-led development in SMSTs

Earlier, we mentioned that cultural tourism results from a policy narrative that aims to promote an alternative to mass tourism given the latter's association with several negative impacts. Nevertheless, no evidence exists to suggest that so-called cultural tourism is more benign than other tourism forms, especially since this form of tourism has also been experiencing a 'massification' process in several destinations. One can only visualize the enormous crowds descending on a particular cultural attraction (e.g., Toledo in Spain) to know that the mass presence of 'cultural' tourists in a particular place is not always a welcome sight. In this section, we focus on two side effects of tourism development that apply to cultural tourism and specifically SMSTs, which attract culture-oriented visitors.

The first effect concerns urbanization. Urban regeneration in late capitalism has been associated, among others, with the growing popularity of the works of Florida (2002, 2005) as well as Landry and Bianchini (1995), that have resulted in the often abused idea of favouring the renaissance of obsolete urban space into buzzing districts, devoted to welcoming international knowledge workers and, consequently, investors. Related to this, a shift in urban branding based on the notion of culture instead of 'mere' entertainment has emerged (Vanolo, 2008, 2015). Much of the literature along these lines has traditionally focused on major cities, analysing large urban redevelopment projects that have turned former industrial spaces into cultural districts while the accompanying housing and retailing have ended up catering primarily to new wealthy residents, tourists and consumers of experiences as opposed to favouring the needs of long-time residents and workers.

One of the problems of the cultural and creative city mantra when we specifically refer to SMSTs is that it can be an 'awkward fit with smaller communities that do not have the infrastructure to support a creative class' (Scherf, 2021, p. 3). However, setting this argument aside, a major problem when it comes to urbanization in connection to cultural tourism is that this can result in gentrification. This process relates to the takeover of economically rundown areas by new development initiatives, which transform these into high-income spaces. Often, the original residents and businesses in these places end up being driven out by rising property values (Mendes, 2018).

While gentrification intersecting with tourism is generally studied with reference to large metropolises (Gravari-Barbas and Guinand, 2017), recent

research has investigated the phenomenon in smaller towns, often in connection with rural gentrification (Alonso González, 2017; Donaldson, 2018). One issue that this research reveals is that depopulated rural areas tend to have higher property vacancy rates compared to urban cores. Alonso González (2017) considers Santiago Millas in the Maragatería region of Spain. After having prospered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the village was nearly abandoned in the second half of the twentieth century. During the 1990s, community members who had earlier emigrated for employment reasons returned. The economic and cultural capital of the returnees varied substantially from that of people who had remained. This significantly influenced the refurbishing of houses, causing changes in the social spaces of villages. The effect of the newcomers' permanent resettlement in the village also resulted in the appropriation of the community and social life, leading to the homogenization of the pre-existing aesthetic and social heterogeneity of the village. Thus, gentrification in SMSTs can adopt a more nuanced tone, albeit not less conflictual, than in major cities.

A second negative externality of tourism development relates to overtourism. Although the problems of visitor crowding and their effects on local communities and environments have been studied for decades (van der Borg et al., 1996), evidence exists that tourism's character in many locations has been changing rapidly since places are increasingly burdened by social, economic and environmental impacts associated with overvisitation. Cultural tourism is certainly not guilt-free when it comes to overtourism. Indeed, it is unfortunate that gaining the designation of a UNESCO World Heritage Site often serves as a recipe for disaster by inadvertently advertising the locality as a must-see on the bucket list of millions of potential visitors. Many historic SMSTs have been affected by the immense crowds who every day descend on them.

Addressing the case of mid-sized heritage cities, Russo (2002) discusses the 'vicious circle' in the development of tourism and heritage cities. This concept 'describes the self-feeding linkage between the emerging class of excursionist tourists in the later stages of a destination lifecycle, and the decline in a city's attractiveness' (Russo, 2002, p. 165). The original vicious cycle model was designed for medium-sized cities where tourism and other urban functions initially overlapped but increasingly became overrun by tourism-dedicated services, which eventually pushed out those catering solely to residents. More recently, Caldeira Neto Tomaz (2021) demonstrated that the small town of Český Krumlov in the Czech Republic experienced a significant increase of visits following its inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1992. A perfect example of a UNESCO-designated city with well-preserved heritage surrounded by a picturesque natural landscape, Český Krumlov gradually

began to lose its distinctive character. Its city centre has become dominated by tourist accommodation and businesses, some of which have little to do with local traditions and products. This has, in turn, driven many permanent residents away from the historical city centre.

Thus, despite the positive reviews often associated with cultural tourism-led development (OECD, 2009; UNWTO, 2022), this form of tourism can prove dangerous in the long term, especially when poorly planned and managed. The main reason why tourism's negative externalities are not seriously considered despite the existence of numerous warnings (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Weaver, 2006) has to do with the political economy. It is sadly obvious that most destinations, including SMSTs, are overwhelmingly growth-oriented. Tourism policies tend to emphasize maintaining a certain growth rate of visitors and visitor spending without considering that these towns' resources are finite and their carrying capacity has been compromised. Indeed, while many destinations have long dealt with overtourism and even though many residents often express enormous irritation about the takeover of their spaces by tourists, policymakers and other stakeholders regularly ignore these views, precisely because their focus is short-term profit-oriented and geared towards a quick fix to escape the community's economic woes. All in all, recent years have demonstrated that the way tourism has grown in several places, including popular SMSTs (as in the examples provided) exposes them to several dangers, which are hard to ignore. Seeking to better comprehend why many SMSTs continue to repeat the same mistakes and to understand how they can enhance their resilience to the shocks of rapid tourism growth may be a fruitful research path to engage with in the future.

Further, tourism is particularly vulnerable to shocks, such as economic crises, terrorist events, natural hazards or changing climate conditions. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has made palpable the vulnerability of tourism-dependent places given the travel restrictions imposed in many countries. Next, we focus more specifically on the issue of vulnerability and suggest possibilities for further research avenues.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The global pandemic, which began at the beginning of 2020, has devastated the tourism sector. Tourism arrivals have plummeted, consequently causing job losses in the sector and related activities. Indeed, the United Nations policy brief *Covid-19 and Transforming Tourism* (2020) indicates that international

arrivals were estimated to drop between 58 and 78 per cent during 2020 leading to a substantial reduction of visitor spending and the loss of approximately 100 million jobs. The report further mentioned that the most vulnerable people in the tourism industry were women and young people, many of whom were employed in small and medium-sized enterprises. With reference specifically to the cultural implications of the pandemic, the policy brief stated that because of the various lockdowns, numerous heritage sites and approximately 85,000 museums were forced to shut down for a considerable time.

A few months after the outbreak of COVID-19 and the ensuing implementation of 'lockdowns' in many localities, various reports and academic articles reflected on the pandemic's effects on tourism and discussed how this situation might serve as an opportunity to reset the industry. To begin with, the aforementioned United Nations policy brief (2020, p. 4) indicated that 'this crisis is also an unprecedented opportunity to transform the relationship of tourism with nature, climate and the economy'. Further, several scholars discussed what the global pandemic means for tourism's future. Ioannides and Gyimóthy (2020) questioned whether the pandemic-related crisis could serve as an opportunity for major transformations in the way tourism will evolve to mitigate its adverse effects on destinations. Though they were sceptical as to whether destinations can escape the path dependence dictated by a neoliberal growth-oriented mindset, they advocated that we must not miss the opportunity to shift our thinking about how tourism can be part of a more sustainable world. In outlining some of the emerging trends at the time of writing, we implicitly solicit research that – as we will see – will be of particular importance for those addressing SMSTs in their research (see concluding remarks). In fact, one trend of (post-)pandemic tourism which is of particular significance for SMSTs is the emergence of less crowded places, often those in more remote and peripheral regions, as alternative destinations for potential visitors wishing to escape destinations that have become the poster children of overtourism. As we describe below, this trend corresponds specifically to the so-called cultural tourism sphere.

International flights and rail travel were dramatically reduced or cancelled during lockdown while currently (at the time of writing) one can only travel to another country upon showing a vaccination pass. Of course, even before the outbreak of the pandemic, domestic tourism accounted for the major share of arrivals in most destinations despite the fact that it has long been international tourism that has been highlighted due to its perceived 'impressive' economic growth potential. Given the current conditions, focusing more specifically on domestic tourism can represent new opportunities for various destinations in several countries. For instance, at the time of writing, Australia was not

expected to reopen its borders to international travellers until mid-2022. In May 2021, the government launched a major campaign – *Holiday Here This Year* – to encourage Australians to take longer holidays in their own country (Australia, 2022).

As we put down the final touches to this chapter, it is hard to say whether domestic tourism will eventually balance any deficit arising from the decline of international arrivals and, if so, to what degree. Unfortunately, no solid data exist at this point. However, we hypothesize that SMSTs, which are targeted as cultural destinations, could provide the ingredients for discovery to potential domestic tourists who are inhibited from travelling abroad. Also, these SMSTs could open up the possibility of visiting an alternative to overcrowded major tourist cities precisely because they are lesser known and, perhaps, located in peripheral (harder-to-reach) regions. Even before the pandemic, a growing tendency had begun to emerge in many places whereby the adage 'bigger is better' was beginning to be questioned. Headlines called for renewed tourist desires for authentic, human-scale immersion in local life, culture and knowledge. This caused certain observers to regard SMSTs as potential destinations which can fulfil these wishes (Scherf, 2021). Further, many SMSTs possess traits that fuel their perception as safer to visit during a pandemic compared to more easily accessible cities. For instance, in a recent survey focusing on changes in tourist behaviour choices among Italian travellers (Corbisiero and Monaco, 2021), 60 per cent of respondents said they planned to avoid urban tourism and tourist cities in their (post-)pandemic trips, and 82.62 per cent of respondents stated that they would have preferred tourist destinations with large open spaces. SMSTs that are gateways to the countryside and to natural parks may have a significant competitive advantage compared to larger cities. As mentioned in the previous section, SMSTs are often the 'nodes' of cultural routes that run 'off the beaten path'. Commonly, they offer the opportunity to merge cultural with outdoor tourism. For example, visitors to these places might be offered the opportunity to hike within a cultural and/or natural landscape.

Conclusion: towards a future research agenda for cultural tourism in SMSTs

Policymakers and other stakeholders increasingly present cultural tourism as a tool for generating local development and economic diversification in SMSTs, steering them away from economic stagnation (Richards and Duif, 2019). Such perceptions apply both to medium and small cities that

were formerly associated with manufacturing or primary-sector activities. Additionally, they relate to former mass tourism destinations that have entered a period of decline following a loss in their popularity. Last, SMSTs may represent the ideal context where tourists and local communities may more eagerly interact, providing a fruitful economic and cultural exchange, which maintains and renews local productive assets (Scherf, 2021).

In this chapter, we have clarified that the relationship between cultural tourism and SMSTs is complicated. To begin with, the definition of what cultural tourism entails is problematic, especially during times when the term has been broadened to encompass the notion of 'experience'. The embodied experience of 'the local' seems to be a specific successful key for cultural tourism (Russo and Richards, 2016b). Therefore, a future research agenda for cultural tourism in SMSTs may first include questions as to what meaningful and valuable uses of their (relational) 'smallness' SMSTs can develop specifically on the ground of tourism.

Some successful patterns – or best practices – for cultural tourism in SMSTs have emerged in the early 2000s based on the increasing role of the cultural and creative industries in the global economy, but these seem to be somewhat fragile and problematic if they are not 'territorialized'. Regional development policies promoted by transnational bodies, from the European Union to UNWTO, increasingly encourage cultural tourism in SMSTs by aiming to favour both knowledge transfer between tourism stakeholders in SMSTs and the promotion of less touristified cities and regions. However, the effectiveness of these policies cannot be taken for granted. A future research agenda should engage in 'testing' global policies on the ground of SMSTs. These policies often suggest cultural – and, increasingly, creative (Duxbury and Richards, 2019) – tourism as a tool for local development, but they still need to be tested through the adoption of both quantitative and qualitative analysis to show the long-term effectiveness of these policies. Is cultural and creative tourism enough to revive the economies of SMSTs? Are there any specific patterns through which SMSTs can develop long-term effectiveness of these policies? Are SMSTs more or less able to react to the deficiencies or the socially, culturally and economically deviant path that culture-led tourism development can bring along?

Poor planning, management and the common inability or lack of willingness to discuss cultural tourism within wider urban policies are also aspects that can eventually lead towards greater harm than good, especially in cases where severe overtourism is often the outcome as in the case of Český Krumlov. Considering this, the notion of 'carrying capacity' remains a valuable concept

for research on cultural tourism in SMSTs. However, applying capacity constraints to a destination might not go far enough when it comes to matters of sustainability. After all, while imposing an upper limit on visits may be desirable from an environmental standpoint, a limited number of rich and acculturated tourists may lead to extreme social inequities in a particular destination (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

The global pandemic highlighted the limits of tourism development given the sector's vulnerability to shocks. However, this global pandemic may possibly turn into a tourism opportunity for SMSTs, especially those that have not yet matured as destinations and do not suffer from overtourism. To this day, cultural tourism has mostly avoided peripheral regions and SMSTs that have only minimally been explored. Indeed, many such places can be transformed into proximity destinations, which are easily accessible to domestic tourists who are hesitant to travel abroad. While at the time of writing cultural/natural itineraries connecting peripheral areas are promoted as possible (post-)pandemic tourist destinations-to-be, little research exists demonstrating the success of such an approach. Considering that SMSTs are often included in these 'off-the-beaten-path' itineraries, a future research agenda could focus on SMSTs in the framework of (post-)pandemic tourism. In this regard, recent scholarship (Scherf, 2021) suggests that five interrelated circumstances may provide favourable conditions in enabling sustainable cultural development in smaller communities – and we suggest these may be extended to SMSTs. They are: (1) the host community recognizes and promotes its embedded sense of place, and is open to 'offer' it to visitors in a fruitful exchange; (2) cultural assets are determined collaboratively through community-led planning in line with sustainable development principles; (3) social and cultural networks band together to share resources, for co-promotion, but also to speak with a unified voice to policymakers, planners and funders; (4) collaboration doesn't only involve the host community stakeholders, but also takes place between tourists and locals, with visitors embodying the role of host community stakeholders; and (5) the presence of visitors with a new mindset. As Scherf (2021, p. 23) concludes, 'tucking into a local culture in this way as a visitor can only happen when the participative arena is manageable – or, put another way, when it is small'.

Last, we wish to highlight that our chapter results from thoughts and concepts which reveal a Western perspective (Winter, 2009). A future research agenda on SMSTs and cultural tourism that derives in parts of the world outside the Global North may bring to life diverse ways of understanding not only 'the smallness' of SMSTs in the context of tourism, but also notions of culture, cultural heritage and the tourist experience at large. It may also acknowledge

development patterns of SMSTs that have not yet been considered. Addressing the link between cultural tourism and SMSTs from a Global South perspective might offer a useful avenue of further research.

Suggestions for further reading

Russo, A.P. 2002. The 'vicious circle' of tourism development in heritage cities. *Annals of Tourism Research*. **29**(1), 165–182.

This article specifically addresses middle-sized heritage cites, a specific kind of cultural tourism destination. A strong claim is made: 'tourism in heritage cities can prove to be unsustainable' (p. 166). Looking at the case of historic Venice, the author revisits the classic tourist destination lifecycle scheme providing a framework to analyse tourism dynamics in an evolutionary perspective. In doing so, and through a concrete case, it is shown how cultural tourism can 'eat SMSTs up' if not carefully managed within a larger urban policy and planning framework.

Russo, A.P. and Richards, G. eds. 2016. *Reinventing the local in tourism: producing, consuming and negotiating place*. Bristol: Channel View Publications.

Chapters in this edited collection investigate some of the forces that have led to new forms of host–guest interactions in various destinations. Contributors deal with issues like questioning what is actually perceived as 'local' in a particular destination, the role of peer-to-peer accommodation platforms (e.g., Airbnb) in reshaping tourist experiences and how, in some places, new products like street art tours create a new interpretation of what constitutes cultural tourism.

Scherf, K. 2021. *Creative tourism in smaller communities: place, culture and local representation*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.

An edited collection of 11 chapters, this book provides updated case studies focusing on the recent shift from cultural to creative tourism. The shift is understood in the book not only in terms of 'object' – from museums to culinary arts or the film industry as an attraction – but also in terms of principles, and namely advocating for creative tourism to be based on collaborative, place-based models. The examples provided fall within most countries' definitions of small or at least medium-sized cities, but the specific conceptual focus is on 'small communities'.

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9 Digital and smart places: ensuring a rural fit in times of urban-biased technological push

Koen Salemink

Introduction: between devices and divides

The 'Smart Countryside' is a concept that is becoming increasingly popular in both academia and policy. In order for places to become 'smart', they first need to become digital. The degree of digitalisation of a place, and with that the ability of a place to become 'smart', is an outcome of a multi-faceted and multi-level process. This process, however, potentially leads to multiple (digital) deprivation, especially in rural communities with a proven track record of digital exclusion, and potentially also in less technologically advanced small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs).

In this chapter I aim to provide a concise overview of the literature on rural digital exclusion so far, and I present some of the new research questions that were recently introduced in the debate. From there I go on to introduce a research agenda inspired by responsible rural research and innovation that helps to negotiate the urban-biased technological push in such a way that local rural needs are addressed.

Please be aware of my background as a rural scholar. This largely determines my starting point and the basis for the overall argument of this chapter. Throughout the chapter I try to point to the commonalities of SMSTs and 'the rural'. In doing this, it is important to understand that SMSTs and the rural are interlinked, and many SMSTs are located and embedded in rural regions (Bosworth and Venhorst, 2018). I will also reflect on how insights from rural research link to the challenges of SMSTs. Having made this clear, let us first turn to the (policy) relevance of 'smart development'.

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Contemporary policies for small towns and villages are sprinkled with the word 'smart'. It seems that local policymakers have adopted the European Commission policy language that deals with 'smart villages', 'digital champions' and 'innovation hubs', resulting in a multi-level policy discourse that ought to foster sustainable, inclusive and future-proof growth (Cowie et al., 2020; Rundel et al., 2020). Nearly all common elements of regional and rural development policies are described in light of 'smart' developments, but what 'smart' means in the rural context is often poorly defined and taken rather opportunistically from 'smart cities' literature (Cowie et al., 2020). Bosworth et al. (2020) provide some clarity and build on the work of Slee (2019) when they describe a 'smart countryside' as a: 'concept … based on combinations of digital technologies and community-based human and social capital to support business innovation and wider community development' (Bosworth et al., 2020, pp. 587–588).

'Smart policies' are expected to address multi-level issues and use digital technologies to effectively combine various sectors, services, stakeholders and needs. This multi-level and technology-driven policy discourse runs the risk of being subject to a 'technology push', or even a 'technology creep'. The development of digital technologies continues and seems to speed up. The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has been set in motion and elements of this revolution are finding their way into cities, small towns and villages (Cowie et al., 2019, 2020). 4IR technologies are developed based on ubiquitous connectivity. This means that, in order to adopt these technologies, places should be served with a very dense network of internet connections. Such a network requires an adequate fibre-optic backbone, supplemented with either fibre-to-the-home or with high-speed reliable wireless (dedicated) connections to the end user (Bürgin, 2021).

'Technology push' and 'technology creep' can only take place if ubiquitous connectivity is provided. In many well-served and relatively affluent urbanised places this push can be facilitated. However, more sparsely populated and less affluent areas cannot always offer ubiquitous connectivity; consider for example rural areas and less affluent SMSTs. Yet it is expected that new technologies, devices, applications and services (including public services) will be subject to this 'technology push' and 'technology creep'. In order to take part and contribute to society and the economy, ubiquitous connectivity will become even more important. Translated into the dominant policy language this means that small towns and villages have to become 'smart' and 'innovative', to enable 'smart and inclusive growth' as 'business incubators' (OECD, 2020; EUR-Lex, 2021).

Next to the material connectivity there are also the social issues of technology adoption, usage and inclusion. Generally speaking, there are several factors that reduce the odds of meaningful adoption of technologies: low education, older age, low income, employment, previous experience with technology and rurality (as in location where one lives) (Mariën et al., 2016). Especially in more remote rural areas, multiple factors are at play, decreasing the overall likelihood of technology adoption and thus digital inclusion (Philip et al., 2017; Salemink et al., 2017).

The question then is how SMSTs and villages, especially those that until now were technologically less advanced, can become future-proof 'smart places and communities'. This chapter will focus on how to enable place-based action for digital and smart towns and villages, as a critical reflection on the 'one-size-fits-all' and 'technology-push' policies that are mostly based on urban (policy) conditions.

The chapter will start with a review of the literature so far, focusing on the potentials and pitfalls of digitalisation (policies). After that it will discuss how urban-led technological development and urban-biased (national) policies resulted in an urban-based technology push. It will then advocate for ensuring a 'rural fit' of technologies and policies, and explain how early involvement of rural scholars can play a role in this. In the end, this chapter presents some key questions for a research agenda to achieve a 'rural fit', based on the principle of responsible (rural) research and innovation (Cowie et al., 2020).

Throughout the chapter, I will link rural literature and rural discourse to this book's wider theme of SMSTs. My research background is predominantly based in rural research, and therefore this chapter is written mostly from a rural perspective. Without elaborating too much on the question what one can consider as rural, I believe one of the key principles in rural research is flipping the logic from urban-based thinking to more non-urban thinking. This means that one has to translate the urban conditions and developments, based on for example high densities, clusters of high income, economies of scale and agglomeration effects, to rural conditions and developments based on lower densities, a lesser likelihood of cluster development, a smaller potential for revenue and profit and fewer opportunities for economic 'buzz'. This is not to frame all that is not urban as places without opportunities, but when it comes to digitalisation it is important to realise that density and agglomeration matter. It is not about an urban–rural dichotomy, yet what matters is a realisation that the less urban a place is, the more a scholar can gain from taking into account insights from rural discourse.

However, digitalisation does not have to be a threat per se for small rural towns and rural communities. To avoid digitalisation becoming a threat, research should not merely strive for the extension of digital innovations into rural communities. Instead, researchers should engage early on and throughout the technology-adoption process to help achieve meaningful adoption for inclusive rural development.

Small and rural towns in times of digitalisation: what we know so far

From rural penalty to digital divides

The problematic rollout of (superfast) broadband in rural areas has been, and partly still is, one of the key issues of rural digitalisation (Townsend et al., 2013, 2015; Salemink et al., 2017). To quote Cowie et al. (2020, p. 169): 'The market led roll-out of broadband and the lack of a critical mass of consumers in rural areas, as well as logistical challenges with infrastructure resulting from remoteness and topography have prevented comprehensive coverage.'

It is widely argued that this problematic rollout can be seen in a broader sense and as a longer-term problem of rural service provision. A lack of market formation in rural areas hinders the development of commercial services, but also of essential (governmental) services (Malecki, 2003; Salemink et al., 2017). Already in 1979 Moseley coined the idea for mobile services in rural areas, by which rural service provision could move beyond service availability directly in a village, towards service accessibility (Moseley, 1979). Such mobile services could not guarantee immediate and ubiquitous availability, but it would make essential service provision in rural areas a lot more cost-effective. However, when it comes to digital connectivity and services, ubiquitous availability is the norm and 'digital by default' is becoming the standard for contact with both commercial and essential service providers (Helsper, 2012; Mariën and Prodnik, 2014). An intermittent connection can therefore not serve the needs of rural citizens and businesses (Townsend et al., 2013).

Much of the rural academic debate over the past decades has focused on problematic service provision and its consequences (Thissen et al., 2021). For a large part these problems can be drawn along the lines of an urban–rural divide (Malecki, 2003). With the increasing importance of digital service provision, digitalisation and the digital divide has now become a pillar of its own within the wider debate. Moreover, digitalisation runs as a common thread

through many other rural debates, for example on rural education, rural economic development, rural governance, agriculture, social inclusion and rural community development, requiring a broader scope for research.

Digital divides: from material have-nots to social and digital inclusion

With this broadening of the scope, scholars started to have a more plural and diversified view on digitalisation. This is reflected in scholarly language by words such as 'digital divides' and 'digital inequalities' (Van Deursen and Helsper, 2015; Salemink et al., 2017; Bürgin, 2021). The first divide is the material divide, which deals with digital 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Generally speaking, cities and accessible rural areas have better internet connections, whereas more remote rural areas and less affluent parts of cities or towns are poorly served by telecommunications providers (Townsend et al., 2013, 2015; Salemink et al., 2017). The second divide deals with the differences in digital skills, adoption and usage, mostly determined by social, economic, demographic and cultural factors, such as low education levels, less income, poor language skills, lack of experience with digital devices, older age and more digital-avoiding lifestyles and convictions (Helsper, 2012; Mariën et al., 2016).

More and more scholars acknowledge that multiple factors are at play, which altogether determine an individual's level of digital inclusion (Helsper, 2012; Mariën and Prodnik, 2014; Park, 2017). Some scholars even suggest that there is a third divide, which deals with how, and to what extent, individuals eventually are able to make effective use of digital applications (Van Deursen and Helsper, 2015). This divide of the third degree would of course play out across urban and rural boundaries, affecting all those who are less able to make effective use of digital opportunities.

Studies that focus on the link between rurality and digital inclusion are mostly case study-based. This can be explained by the nature of rural research. Rural settings and their respective lower densities make it harder to conduct purely quantitative research, and even though mixed methods are gaining popularity, it remains hard to move beyond some of the rather idiosyncratic findings and generalise based on these (smaller number of) cases (Strijker et al., 2020). However, I support Bürgin (2021) when he argues that the value of such case studies lies in the in-depth character which enables researchers to unpack factors behind digitalisation in a very detailed way. Furthermore, I would argue that the importance of the geographical context, and the idiosyncrasy of many of the so-called 'good practices', in fact show that generic solutions for local development cannot fulfil their promises. Instead, policymakers who

deal with local and rural development ought to adapt generic concepts to make a rural and local fit (Rundel and Salemink, 2022).

From urban–rural divide to inner-rural divide

A key outcome of the developing debates requires special attention here. There is growing evidence that a multiplicity of factors contribute to an individual's digital inclusion (Helsper, 2012; Van Deursen and Helsper, 2015; Mariën et al., 2016). The urban–rural divide in service provision is still a prominent factor for rural digital inclusion, but it is no longer seen as the all-encompassing factor that explains differences in digital inclusion. More importantly, there is an increasing awareness of intra-urban and intra-rural divides, and divides between towns (Cowie et al., 2020; Bürgin, 2021).

A variety of factors are at play when it comes to digital inclusion (see the above-mentioned factors). This means that we have to recognise that even if someone lives in a well-served accessible town or rural area, this person can still be digitally excluded following their skill set or their disposable income. On the other hand, a person can live in a poorly served remote rural area, while in parallel this person regularly spends time in a well-served city for work, building a relevant skill set and having access to high-speed internet at moments when it matters. Or someone might live in a well-served city, yet regularly spend time in the periphery in order to experience a different kind of digital connectivity, with fewer distractions (Bürgin et al., 2021). In this light, the COVID pandemic has shown the world what new forms of digital multi-locality could take shape in the future (Bürgin et al., 2021, p. 95).

It is essential here to recognise that, because of ongoing digitalisation:

- existing patterns of exclusion could be exacerbated;
- new patterns of exclusion might arise, while not replacing the old patterns of exclusion; and
- new patterns of inclusion might be introduced, thereby closing some of the previous offline divides.

It is becoming clear that spatial patterns of exclusion and inclusion will be shifting, building on and evolving around existing and new patterns of inclusion and exclusion. This means that, in order to conduct meaningful geographical research into the impact of digitalisation, researchers have to move beyond, yet not forget, the old divides, and acknowledge the concurrent existence of urban–rural, inner-urban, inner-rural and inner-local divides. In light of this book, one could argue that it is not automatically the case that

medium-sized towns will perform better than small towns when it comes to digitalisation. Spatial patterns of digitalisation are the outcome of generic digital developments that coalesce with multiple local deprivations. There is a lot of literature on how this works in rural contexts (Park, 2017; Philip et al., 2017; Salemink et al., 2017), and insights from this literature can be used in studies on for example SMSTs.

Key to understanding these spatial outcomes is unpacking both sides of the equation. Merely addressing the local aspects, which is a risk that comes with the dominance of case study approaches in many rural studies, will not go beyond idiosyncratic place-specific findings. In order to address the broader issues of digital inequalities, one needs to have a critical look at the generic urban-based, or urban-biased, technological push.

From rural problem to rural challenge

The constant problem: urban-based technological push

Until now it has not been a matter of choice for people how, or to what extent, they would like to be digitally included, or whether they want a (working) life with digital multi-locality. A variety of structural and personal factors hinder and/or enable digital inclusion (Helsper, 2012; Mariën et al., 2016; Park, 2017). There is, however, a specific external factor which hinders rural digital inclusion. I cannot go into full detail here about how the market for digital technology works, but I will explain some of the key principles that lie at the basis of an exogenous challenge for rural areas.

The urban-based (or biased) technological push

Companies that develop digital technologies are predominantly based in cities, and most often, these companies start off by serving urban markets. Urban areas, especially wealthy areas in metropolitan regions, provide the largest potential customer base of 'early adopters'. Following a market rationale, companies then decide to first target wealthy highly urbanised market areas – a large number of potential customers means that there is the best chance to create revenue and break even and, eventually, make a profit (Malecki, 2003; Salemink et al., 2017; Bürgin, 2021). Wider adoption and diffusion of a technology then is hoped to be achieved like an oil stain on a map, creating further market formation or penetration.

One of the key drivers of innovation is taking digital technology further and making more possible with less effort. Primarily, although not exclusively, these digital innovations are developed *from*, *in* and *for* market areas with ubiquitous high-speed digital connectivity (Cowie et al., 2020). According to Park (2017, p. 399), rural demand is not deemed attractive in the market for digital technologies. Hence, one could argue that digital innovations are developed from an urban base, and with an urban bias of ubiquitous connectivity.[1]

If we were to still have a more classical urban–rural digital divide, the above market situation would lead to 'haves' in urban areas and 'have-nots' in rural areas. However, material connectivity in rural areas is progressing and some regions are finally catching up with urban frontrunners (Salemink and Strijker, 2018; Bürgin, 2021). This then means that new technologies can be adopted in an increasing number of rural areas, mostly by so-called 'early adopters' (Salemink et al., 2017). It is important to note here, though, that these new technologies were predominantly developed from, in and for urban market areas. Moreover, most new digital technologies were also not developed with the needs of inhabitants or businesses in SMSTs in mind; these are expected to adopt the generic innovation, assuming a sort of false homogeneity among large cities and SMSTs.

This is not to say that innovations cannot be developed in rural places. In fact, there are well-known examples of innovative technology-based companies based in small towns or rural areas (Meili and Mayer, 2017; Cowie et al., 2019). With few exceptions, the spatial imbalance persists, with an urban-dominated market for digital technologies followed by rural laggards. More generally speaking, I agree with Bosworth and Venhorst (2018) and Bosworth et al. (2020, p. 589) when they state that 'the sparse nature of rural areas means that more things happen beyond the local area and more change occurs as a result of external factors'.

Understanding and recognising the urban-based technology push and innovations that stem from it is essential for negotiating a local rural fit and, eventually, achieving meaningful technology adoption that addresses local rural needs.

The ongoing challenge: creating a rural fit

Creating a so-called 'rural fit', which is needed for meaningful adoption of generic concepts, developments or technologies, is arguably the ongoing challenge for 'ruralists'.[2] If rural researchers and policymakers accept that more things happen beyond the local rural area, they will conclude that their key

contribution lies in supporting the mitigation and negotiation process, thereby contributing to responsible research and innovation (Bosworth et al., 2020; Cowie et al., 2020). One could argue that this also applies to scholars that work on SMSTs, since they also have to translate generic concepts in order to apply them in their respective contexts.

Accepting the importance of external factors builds on the logic of neo-endogenous development theory. This theory assumes that the endogenous assets of local communities can only be used when a community is able to connect to exogenous resources. In fact, endogenous assets of local communities ought to gain value through the interaction with external markets and service providers (Salemink and Bosworth, 2014; Bock, 2016; Bosworth et al., 2020). The question then is how exogenous developments, such as the introduction of new digital technologies, can be made meaningful for local rural communities. Can exogenous ideas and innovations fulfil local needs in such a way that the exogenous does justice to the endogenous? Or in light of this chapter, can an urban-based digital innovation be subjected to a process of 'rural and local fitting' in such a way that the digital innovation will be used in a meaningful way that helps to address rural and local challenges? Moreover, if a rural fit cannot be created, how will this impact existing patterns of inequality? Or if a rural fit is achieved to a certain extent, how will this rural fit impact existing patterns of inequality?

The debate around a smart countryside and smart SMSTs will inevitably deal with issues of spatial justice. Similar to the debate on digital inequalities, the debate on spatial justice is starting to recognise that there are no 'one-size-fits-all' approaches for achieving more spatial justice. The assets, needs and ambitions can differ greatly both between and within local rural communities, as well as between and within SMSTs. To eliminate spatial differences, one first needs to recognise inter- and intra-community differences.

Key scholarly challenges in digital rural development: understanding *multiple digital deprivation*

In the section above I argued that questions around spatial justice, and all its complexities, could serve as an overarching frame for the debate on digital rural development and the smart countryside. The scholarly debate on digital rural development is lively and developing rapidly. Researchers from a variety of backgrounds in social science and engineering are exploring new concepts, policy approaches, technological solutions and, more critically, new potential

catalysts for inequality. Whether these are more generic developments such as digitalisation in education, digital service provision, digital healthcare and digital home office working or more rural-specific developments such as digital hubs, digital farming solutions and digital demand-responsive public transport, these developments have in common that existing material and social inequalities potentially will be deepened, and new divides might be instigated (Cowie et al., 2019, 2020; Bosworth et al., 2020; Bürgin, 2021; Rundel and Salemink, 2021).

In this light, it is beneficial to start viewing digital (rural) development from a multiple digital deprivation perspective (analogue multiple deprivation indexes already exist, such as the Scottish Multiple Deprivation Index[3]). In order to work towards a local (rural) fit, it is crucial to know which factors are driving local mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. The extent to which these factors stem from exogenous or endogenous developments further helps to inform local mitigation strategies.

In my view, understanding multiple digital deprivation is key to understanding how (further) digital and social exclusion might be prevented. Or, viewed more positively, how digital and social inclusion might be fostered. However, I am not naive and I realise that one of the key drivers behind unequal (rural) digital developments, the urban-biased technology creep, will remain influential. Nevertheless, when we as scholars recognise this creep, we should be alert and consider what our role might be in turning this 'creeping technology' into something meaningful for rural communities. Making technology meaningful for rural communities requires more than merely advertorial lip service – it requires a fundamental rethinking of how a new technology might contribute to the overall wellbeing of rural communities. Building on a long history of diffusion theory (Rogers, 2003) we should not be asking ourselves as scholars how a technology might be 'extended to' a household or business, but rather question how the technology could be meaningfully 'adopted in' a community (Salemink et al., 2017; Cowie et al., 2020; Bürgin, 2021). This requires a change of perspective in which endogenous factors can be strengthened by exogenous resources, and not the other way round.

The scholarly challenges are manifold, but these challenges can only be meaningfully addressed when researchers are working from a key question that stems from responsible rural research and innovation (Cowie et al., 2020). The general development is that villages are expected to come up with a smart village agenda, but how can we prevent that this development excludes villages that lack the capacity to do this properly? In other words, how can we as academics contribute to the empowerment of villages so that they can join

the digital revolution? If we do not continue to work on this question, then it will become ever more likely that the 'smart society' can only be there for those (parts of) communities that are already thriving. 'Smart rural development' is in constant need of an inclusive agenda that manages to deal with old and new, and analogue and digital inequalities. Researchers should recognise the heterogeneity of the communities they study; thereby acknowledging the inner-community differences (Thissen et al., 2021). Smart rural solutions require not only a rural fit to correct urban preconceptions and urban technology creep, but also a specific local fit that abates potential catalysts for inequality and inner-rural divides.

Again, these scholarly challenges to a large degree also apply to the field of SMSTs research. There are more resourceful and less resourceful towns, and in fact many SMSTs face multiple deprivations, making some SMSTs more vulnerable to digital deprivations. Dealing with material inequalities might be less difficult for SMSTs because of their relatively greater density compared to rural areas, but plenty of challenges remain and responsible research and innovation might help in addressing these challenges too.

Calling upon colleagues: early engagement for better urban–rural policy translation

A pivotal part of the rhetoric of this chapter is based on the observation that urban-based or urban-biased technologies set the norm, and that SMSTs and rural areas are forced to follow this norm. I would argue that this urban norm setting also applies to academia. Urban-based research and urban theorists generally lead the advancement of academic debates, after which rural research follows and attempts to apply urban-based theories and concepts in rural settings. It is not my aim here to judge this mechanism per se, but I would argue that this urban bias creates rural blind spots, for example regarding why rural demand and needs are not met by urban-led technology development. Again, a similar dynamic can be seen in the translation from urban to SMSTs.

Responsible (rural) research and innovation ought to prevent these blind spots. This means we should not take theories or technologies and merely bring them to the rural or SMSTs. We should go to the rural and SMSTs and try to establish what communities need from, for example, smart technologies. Early engagement is essential for having impact on the ground, and simultaneously it can contribute to building a more rural-just, or SMST-just, theoretical framework.

When we as rural or SMST scholars know the local needs beforehand, we can actively contribute to better smart development when a new technology is introduced. Getting access to smartphone apps that easily show where you can order food online, or smart apps that show real-time departure times of buses, will probably not convince rural users – the app will show that the user lives outside the delivery area of the restaurant, or that the next bus is due the next day, depending on whether it is a school day. A secure app that might ease the care for an older neighbour, for example by easy video calling for when the caring neighbour is in the city for work, might be more convincing – especially if the app does not crash too easily when the connection is flaky. I invite SMST scholars to provide examples that fit their research context.

Once we as researchers are convinced of these local nuances, we might be on a quicker and more meaningful track to understanding what a smart rural place or a smart SMST could be.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Ubiquitous connectivity in urban areas of course does not implicate that every household and business in a city is 'online by default', yet the main point here is that the largest market potential is to be found in urban areas.
2. 'Ruralists': rural researchers, policymakers and activists could, by analogy of the term 'urbanists', use this term to describe contributors to rural debates (please note that I do not refer to the English art group that aimed to achieve a revival of rural idyll in painting – https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/r/ruralists).
3. Scottish Multiple Deprivation Index: https://simd.scot/#/simd2020/BTTTFTT/9/ -4.0000/55.9000/

Suggestions for further reading

Cowie, P., Townsend, L. and Salemink, K. 2020. Smart rural futures: Will rural areas be left behind in the 4th industrial revolution? *Journal of Rural Studies*. **79**, 169–176.

This recent paper that Paul Cowie, Leanne Townsend and I wrote covers some similar questions as this chapter does, but it applies a purely rural perspective. Furthermore, the paper assesses how particular 'smart technologies' will impact the rural economy and rural life in general. It proposed the idea that responsible rural research and innovation: 'should examine not just the practical and physical aspects of 4IR but also issues of power, control and agency in the way the technology is developed and applied to rural areas' (p. 175). In this chapter I try to, among others, shed a light on some of these issues.

Helsper, E. 2012. A corresponding fields model for the links between social and digital exclusion. *Communication Theory*. **22**, 403–426.

Another paper that greatly influenced my work is Ellen Helsper's work on 'a corresponding fields model' in which she connects the offline social realm to the digital realm, to understand how social fields and digital fields of exclusion interact (Helsper follows the fields theory of Bourdieu). To understand how digitalisation impacts people differently, and to realise that the internet is not something that dissolves social and geographical difference, it really helps to see how offline and online fields interact. The digital is grounded in the social, the economical, the cultural, and the personal.

Malecki, E.J. 2003. Digital development in rural areas: Potentials and pitfalls. *Journal of Rural Studies*. **19**(2), 201–214.

Edward Malecki's paper on 'the rural penalty' is in my view a classic and must be read to understand how market formation and dynamics determine the geographical diffusion of services (both commercial and governmental). 'The rural penalty' is obvious in the case of rural telecommunication provision, and recently I have come to the conclusion that this logic of first serving the areas with the biggest market potential also has a great impact on the development of SMSTs.

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10 The important role of nature in planning for small cities

Timothy Beatley

Introduction

The global pandemic of 2020–2021 has demonstrated the essential role of nature as a soothing and therapeutic force in the face of extraordinary levels of personal and family stress and anxiety. During COVID-19 people have sought the solace and support of parks and greenspaces of various kinds and sizes, and the sights and sounds of birds and other urban wildlife. In many places this renewed appreciation for nature has ignited new discussions about the role of nature in cities moving forward, in some cities leading to a collective sense of the need to make more room for wildness and wild nature.

This chapter will explore the role that nature can play in the design and planning of smaller cities, where there is often the chance to do more and to integrate nature into the urban fabric in more creative ways. The chapter will argue that nature is not optional but absolutely essential for happy, healthy, meaningful lives, and that we should embrace a new vision of city building – one of biophilic design and planning – that puts nature at the center. Small cities especially have the chance to adopt a more holistic, nature-immersive vision, and there are many positive examples that the author will describe. The chapter will review some of the key ways, and key places, where nature can be inserted and grown. From rooftop meadows and living walls, to urban trail networks, to native gardens and landscaping and tree planting, there are many ways nature can take hold.

This chapter builds on the experiences of cities participating in the Biophilic Cities Network, a global network of cities putting nature at the center of their design and planning. Currently 26 cities are participating formally as "partner cities," as well as several thousand individuals and several hundred organiza- tions (e.g. see Beatley, 2017). Partner cities in the network embrace the vision of immersive, seamless nature; the understanding that nature in cities is not just to be found in discrete, isolated places (e.g. a park) but rather the city itself

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is an ecosystem. Some of the key assumptions behind this emerging new vision of urbanism are presented in the following.

The vision of biophilic cities: key elements

Nature is Immersive
Nature is Integrated, Continuous and Seamless
Nature is Found Beyond Parks
Built and Natural Environments Together
Importance of Biodiversity and Wildness
Just and Inclusive
A Culture of Biophilia
A Whole of City Approach (from roof/rooftop to region/bioregion)
A Whole of Life Approach. (Beatley, 2017)

Partner cities in the network have adopted and are implementing a variety of initiatives and strategies for bringing more nature into cities. Many of these specific policy and planning tools are finding application in small cities (including biophilic codes and standards, such as green area ratio requirements and greenspace factor systems, as well as incentives and subsidies for urban greening and the use of pilot projects and initiatives). A central question addressed in this chapter is whether smaller cities are better positioned to adopt and implement the biophilic vision. Three specific small cities in the network are discussed and reviewed, as possible points of evidence in favor of this view. While an open question, it does seem plausible that the small size of these cities makes it easier to move in the direction of more natureful, biophilic cities.

Understanding the role of smaller biophilic cities

Three small cities in the Biophilic Cities Network stand out as especially exemplary for their efforts at pursuing biophilic policies and a biophilic vision and will be discussed further below: Curridabat (Costa Rica), Reston (Virginia, United States) and Fremantle (Western Australia). Reston is not technically or legally a city but rather is governed by the Reston Association (and is situated in the larger legal entity of Fairfax County). However, it is thought of by its residents, and functionally serves, as a distinct city, and so will be referred to in this way here. The chapter will focus on the experiences and opportunities of

these smaller members of the global Biophilic Cities Network. Successes will be reviewed but also obstacles faced along the way.

These three cities represent an interesting group, each quite special. And though they are close in population and physical size, they differ in many other ways. Reston is the newest of the three, coming out of the period of interest in "new towns" in the United States in the 1960s, while Curridabat and Fremantle are each quite a bit older (1929 and 1829, respectively).

Each city has joined and is a partner city in the global Biophilic Cities Network. Partner cities range in population size from large to small, with Curridabat (at 72,000 residents), Reston (60,000 residents) and Fremantle (31,000 residents) as several of the smallest cities in the network. Most cities in the network are considerably larger in terms of population, including San Francisco, Edmonton, Birmingham (United Kingdom) and Singapore. Many of these cities are quite active on the global scene and have long histories of innovation in the areas of green infrastructure and green urbanism. It is important to note that such cities have much larger staffs, budgets and resources available to implement biophilic plans, programs and codes than the smaller ones.

All three cities have impressive nature qualities, though in understandably different ways. Each of these small cities has taken remarkable steps in the area of biophilic design and planning. They are quite different programs, policies and initiatives, but each in their own way are unique and exemplary. I will now briefly profile each small city and provide at least a beginning sense of some of the impressive efforts they have taken, especially given their relative population size.

Reston, VA: a green new town

Nature plays a strong and important role in the genesis of Reston, a new town established by visionary Robert E. Simon, who intentionally designed the community with abundant trails and trees, and with the intention of making it easy for residents to spend time outside (Figure 10.1). There is in Reston a "continuous interweaving of lakes and wooded areas," and the clustered housing means that common greenspaces replace "useless front lawns" (Simon Enterprises, 1962).

Reston, a new town crafted from several thousand acres of forest and farmland, was conceived from the beginning as an effort to create a living environment blending the beauty of nature and architecture. Its spatial form is organized around a series of villages, with a distinct mixed-use center in each, and with

Figure 10.1 The new town of Reston, Virginia was designed from the beginning to incorporate significant amounts of greenspace and to facilitate contact with nature. The nature in close proximity to residents there takes many forms including trees and forests, streams and meadows and the town provides many opportunities for residents to engage in and enjoy the nature, including hiking and strolling its extensive network of trails and participating in annual events such as dragonfly and butterfly counts

extensive trails and pathways, with homes situated within extensive forests. According to its founding principles "Reston would be beautiful – nature would be fostered" (Reston Museum, 2021).

In Reston nature is a main reason why someone would be attracted to living there. In the city's original village, Lake Anne, opening in 1965, urban design is modeled after Italian towns, with a mix of densities, in a very walkable environment, organized around a human-made lake, providing near continuous physical and visual connections with water (e.g. Terio-Simon, 2022).

One important element in the life of the city is Reston's Walker Nature Center. This is a nature center that holds an important place in the life of the city. Providing extensive nature programming is a hallmark of life in Reston and its residents, and the percentage of residents participating in some form of

nature program or event over the course of the year is impressive. The Reston Association described the Walker Nature Center in this way: "72 acres of forested land, a picnic pavilion, demonstration gardens, educational signage, a fire ring, two streams, a pond, the entrance to 44-acre Lake Audubon and our educational building, known as Nature House" (Reston Association, n.d.).

Reston represents an excellent and unusual example of a small city that has taken extensive steps to reach its population and to engage them and connect them with the nature around them. There is a standing citizen committee that prepares (not quite annually) an exhaustive state of the environment report. It is quite comprehensive and addresses a wide range of environmental issues, from water quality to forest management to light pollution. One section takes stock of environmental education and outreach noting that in 2020 (the most recent version of the report) the city had reached some 21,500 residents through various programs (Reston Association, 2020). This is down somewhat from past years, a recognition of the effects of the pandemic. But the report does acknowledge that use of Reston's extensive trails and pathways in the city has gone up during the pandemic.

Given the city's population of around 60,000, the number of nature contacts is rather impressive, and reflects the many different kinds of nature activities available there over the course of the year. More than one-third of residents have had some form of nature engagement. Everything from hands-on dragon-fly and butterfly and bird counts, to BioBlitzs (intensive citizen-engaged events aimed at finding and counting biodiversity), to the many school-connected programs offered by the city. Many of these contacts occur through the work of the Walker Nature Center.

The role of the city's Walker Nature Center is a big part of the explanation here, as well as the visibility and ease of registering in nature events. The city's extensive nature programming is available through the city's "WebTrac" or "online registration payment system." Logging on to this system there is a prominent box labeled nature, that displays the availability and description of the nature programs (e.g. Track Lab and Owl Lab events), showing details of these events, whether there is availability and with one-click easy registration. There are both in-person and virtual events to participate in and there is quite a lot for kids and families to do – multiple "kids trout fishing days" and even a series of events for toddlers. The extent to which nature is seamlessly integrated into the digital portals of this city matches the physical integration that happens here.

Another characteristic of life in a relatively small city is that there are also a number of residents engaging nature through some form of environmental

volunteering. In 2020, some 1091 environmental volunteers were recorded, performing a number of different tasks – a sizable number of residents, given the city's size, directly working on nature.

Reston has also enthusiastically embraced its participation in the Biophilic Cities Network, having officially joined as a partner city in 2018. One of the most interesting things connected that the city has undertaken is its biophilic pledge. A list of 13 different actions or steps that might be taken, the pledge challenges residents to commit to undertake at least six of these actions (see Reston Association, 2020).

Fremantle, Australia: historic port city with a green heart

Fremantle, a small and progressive city in the Perth metro area of Western Australia, has a similar history of commitments to environment and sustainability. Joining the Biophilic Cities Network in 2018, it remains the only Australian city to have officially joined as a partner city. Among their other commitments include the adoption of the One Planet Sustainability framework, in 2014, committing them to a "vision … where people lead healthy, happy lives within their fair share of the Earth's resources." The city has adopted a set of One Planet Principles and also a One Planet Action Plan, laying out green and sustainable targets that include powering all city buildings and parks with renewable energy by 2025, but also several that deal directly with local nature, such as the goal of increasing its tree canopy (also including in its Urban Forest Plan) to 20 percent (by 2027).

Many of Fremantle's environmental goals and aspirations can be found in its *Greening Fremantle: Strategy Plan*, which aligns closely with its One Planet vision. One impressive ongoing goal has been to (continue to) be a carbon-neutral city, something it has achieved for more than a decade by purchasing carbon offsets. (In 2018, the latest year reported, the city purchased offsets through "Biodiverse Reforestation Carbon Offsets in the Yarra Yarra Biodiversity Corridor" as well as from certified wind power.) Fremantle has established a number of nature goals and targets, including some of the following:

- an increase in tree canopy cover to 20 percent by 2027;
- planting an average of 1000 per year;
- ensuring at least the minimum of 3.6 hectares of public open space per 1000 residents;
- ensuring that every worker and resident is within a 400 meter walkable distance from functional open space; and

- need to maintain and increase where possible support for planting/biodiversity programs.

Fremantle has also been a leader (especially for a small city) in low-carbon housing design, and recently approved WA's first timber-framed office building.

Like Reston, there is a considerable amount of nature in Fremantle, including ten "natural reserves." It does not yet have a local biodiversity conservation plan, but has several guiding plans and strategies, including an Urban Forest Plan (City of Fremantle, 2017). Its tree canopy level is quite a bit lower than the other two cities, at 13 percent, with (again) an aspiration of reaching 20 percent by 2027. Nevertheless, Freo has impressive green areas, and particularly in south Freo a longstanding culture of open-air homes with patios and terraces and extensive connections with nature. There are also iconic public spaces in the city, including the Norfolk Pine forest at the city's esplanade and the grand fig trees in the center of the city.

Fremantle has established several interesting programs to facilitate native plantings including a "Verge Preparation Assistance Scheme," which subsidizes plantings between roads and sidewalls (verges). Under the scheme property owners are allotted up to 40 native plants per year (and even more plants for larger projects; for more detail see City of Fremantle, 2022a). The plants are grown by a local native nursery called APACE, which sources seeds with very specific local provenance. APACE describes itself as a "community regeneration nursery," specializing "in the propagation and supply of plant species indigenous to the Swan Coastal Plain and the Darling Range" (APACE, 2022). An unusual nursery and seed bank but a fitting partner for Fremantle Council.

For Fremantle, there is remarkable nature, then, but there is also an emphasis on nature through art. One of the city's most interesting approaches is to funding public art through a "percent for nature" requirement (City of Fremantle, 2022b). Percent for art requirements have become increasingly common, yet the Fremantle standard is unusual in that it applies to all new development projects in the city, private as well as public. Specifically, the city requires 1 percent of "gross construction costs" at a minimum.

Much of the resulting public art is nature themed. Recent examples include dramatic and beautiful murals, such as the numbat (an endangered species of mammal endemic to Western Australia). Painted by the well-known Belgian muralist ROA, it is 80-feet long and visually difficult to miss (Figure 10.2). A commitment to art in this city is certainly one of the aspects of what makes

the city unique. As a recent *Forbes* travel article declared: there is an "incredibly dazzling kaleidoscope of street art that seems to await you around every corner" (MacGregor, 2019).

Source: Image credit: Tim Beatley.

Figure 10.2 The numbat mural in Fremantle by Belgian artist ROA

This does indeed seem to be the case, and much of biophilic in focus. This is also a city where citizens directly create their own art, with dramatic examples of nature-themed creations, from one homeowner's mailbox in the shape of a shark's head to the life-sized swordfish that occupies another homeowner's front yard. Much of the art has a maritime or marine theme to it, reflecting Fremantle's status as a port and its location on the Indian Ocean. Nature is never very far away in Fremantle and the physical and visual access to water is an ever-present fact of life there.

Curridabat, Costa Rica: emerging "sweet city"

Curridabat is best known for its initiative called Ciudad Dolce or "Sweet City." It is a comprehensive effort to reimagine the spaces of the city as pollinator gardens and places for growing native plants and trees, officially adopted in 2016.

A distinctive and unusual aspect of this holistic vision is the explicit inclusion of pollinators and indeed all other non-human forms of life. Curridabat has crafted a vision and program that explicitly (and repeatedly) speaks of pollinators – bees, butterflies and hummingbirds – as citizens of the city.

García Brenes and Muñoz Rivera (2020) describe the Sweet City vision this way:

> The Sweet City vision recognizes pollinators, which are the largest producers of plants, trees, and ultimately soil, as the centre of urban design. By reframing the role of pollinators, and recognizing them as native inhabitants and city dwellers, Sweet City overcomes the long-lived antagonism between city and nature that has characterized traditional urban development.

Few cities, even those with extensive environmental and biophilic *bona fides*, have been bold enough to explicitly embrace such a radically inclusive agenda and language. As the city says, with the Sweet City vision, "pollinators such as bees, butterflies and hummingbirds, as well as the plants and trees they are ultimately linked to, along with all other organisms, are effectively recognized as citizens, with roles to play and rights to be upheld" (Curridabat City, n.d., p. 6).

Explicitly recognizing bees and birds and the other coinhabitants of cities as "citizens of the city" is unique and potentially quite impactful if other cities adopt a similar approach. It is hard to imagine a similar policy declaration and broad ethical statement easily passing in a much larger city. And this ethical underpinning of egalitarianism and rights of non-human species provides a strong foundation for the planting of native plants and trees (as well as for stated support for pets in the city – the city's Municipal Animal Welfare Program is stated to be the first of its kind in Costa Rica, addressing everything from new dog parks to education about caring for animals, to increased inspectors to address suspected circumstances of animal cruelty; see American Expatriate Costa Rica, 2018).

Even more holistically, the city speaks of trees as citizens as well. It has inventoried much of its tree stock as part of a carbon capture study and plans to develop some creative programs to foster greater connection to its trees.

> With information available for every tree in several of the city's parks, our aim is to implement an online app which will allow visitors to scan a QR code tag on a particular tree and receive information such as its common name, scientific name, relevant facts and a statement of its singular value for the city and its inhabitants, including a calculation of how much carbon it stores. Ultimately, we want our citizens to recognize trees as fellow neighbors and key members of our city. (Curridabat City, n.d., p. 26)

This vision has resulted already in significant actions and projects on the ground in the city, including the new master plans to guide the revitalization of some 60 city parks, developed through extensive community engagement, and that emphasize native plants and pollinator-supportive species (and the installation of bee hotels). The city has been implementing a Sweet Sidewalks initiative creating pollinator gardens along sidewalks. There has been a series of biocorridors identified in the city where birds and butterflies and other local species can move into and through the city, and that also become the focus of the planting of native plants. Spaces of Sweetness seeks to plan for and insert more greenery and native plants in neighborhoods in the city, with a special emphasis on "economically-marginalized communities" (Curridabat City, n.d., p. 24). The city has also produced a guide to plants, mostly native, that the city recommends residents and developers to plant (the *Sweet City Greenery Guide*).

Water-sensitive urban design and water management planning, changes to urban lighting and more community gardens and gardening are other important foci to the nature work there. One especially ambitious undertaking, now well under way, is the establishment of the Center for Territorial Intelligence in Biodiversity. This will serve as a place of study and experimentation, a demonstration site for sustainable technologies and a native plants nursery, supplying many of the plants needed for Sweet City.

The special role of nature in small cities: some tentative conclusions

These three small cities offer some initial insights into how we might transition to a model of urbanism that puts nature at the center. Each of these cities reflects a history of innovative biophilic actions, programs and policies. Expressions of this vision of biophilic cities takes shape in different ways in each of these cities but reflects a centrality to nature that is still unusual in most cities.

There is parallel work being done in all three cities, especially around creatively inserting and growing more nature in civic spaces and at the neighborhood scale. All three jurisdictions demonstrate how nature can become a defining and central aspect of urban life in a small city and important to its identity.

These three cities highlight the reality that the kinds of nature found and nature connections that will be possible will necessarily vary by geography

and region. All three have placed remarkable emphasis on the importance of nature, reflecting in taking the step of joining the Biophilic Cities Network. But the kind of nature and nature opportunities present are quite different. Different ecologies, social institutions, types of actor involved and even the physical layout and configuration of the city will all influence potential nature interventions and what is feasible in each place. In Fremantle, the deeper (longer) history of aboriginal culture and connection to nature and place are becoming increasingly important and more visible (e.g. efforts at renaming streets and places using Aboriginal words, design of parks that educate about the Noongar Six-Seasons).

Does the small size in meaningful ways explain what these cities have been able to do and that each appears to be "punching above its weight class"? This chapter has been more descriptive, explanatory and speculative than definitive research. But it does seem that there are opportunities to do things, to engage the public innovatively, to express commitments to nature that might be more difficult in much larger cities. Is it possible for smaller cities to reach consensus about the importance of nature and the need for biophilic and nature-based approaches? These three cities took steps to join the Biophilic Cities Network and as a result are (again) not randomly chosen cities. Nevertheless, all three reflect an ability to be nimble and creative in forging a nature-directed path.

Each of these cities, albeit in slightly different ways, has been able to employ and enlist nature in crafting a clear identity of itself; one that most residents accept and embrace. There are certainly much larger cities that have been able to do this as well (in the Biophilic Cities Network, Singapore comes immediately to mind), but size does seem to be a factor, and it does seem easily or more feasible to do this in smaller cities. For Curridabat the embrace of "Sweet City" has become an exercise in "branding," valuable and useful for many reasons, including economic ones and the ability to stand out from other cities in the San Jose metropolitan area. For Reston, this identity as a city close to nature flows directly from the vision of its founder Robert E. Simon. For Fremantle, it is a vision of an historic seaport, close to water and sea, with an emphasis on outdoor living.

Each of these small cities is grappling with change, of course, and it remains to be seen how the embrace of a vision and practice of biophilic urbanism will aid in dealing effectively with this change. In Reston, new higher-density development is already taking place in its town center, partly a recognition of the pressures brought by the extension of the Washington, DC's metro system. There is considerable uncertainty about what the biophilic vision means for this future growth (could it mean the need to include sky parks and vertical

gardens and rooftop meadows in new high-rise building design?) and little experience so far in designing this higher-density growth in more natureful or nature-connected ways. My hunch though is that the embrace of nature will help to soften this density and moderate the perceived negative aspects of higher-density development and growth, as we have seen in other cities in the Biophilic Cities Network (Singapore is again a good example).

All three cities provide compelling examples of engaging the general public in the agenda of nature, and the benefits of doing this, as well as different possible strategies. Reston's story is one that begins with the importance of nature, designing a new town from the beginning that emphasizes nature, trees, water and trails; not as afterthoughts, but as central to its founding vision and baked into its design. Fremantle and Curridabat come to emphasize nature later, but it is clear in both cases there is much about their physical and natural contexts (e.g. the coastal and marine setting in the case of Fremantle) that helps to explain the importance of nature and each city's embrace of a natureful city vision.

The role of nature in small cities: many open research questions

These small city cases raise some interesting and important research questions moving forward. An overarching research question, of course, is what role the size of a city plays in the work of designing and bringing about a truly biophilic city. How and in what ways are smaller cities nimbler in making nature more accessible, and connecting residents to the nature around them? Larger cities are able to do these things as well, but it does seem that smaller cities are able to more creatively reach residents.

In all three cities there were important biophilic policy innovations, and an important central question of whether this is explained, at least in part, by the organizational or administrative or political ability to put such policies in place. Is this more feasible in smaller cities? And why precisely?

Does the size of the elected bodies in cities make a meaningful difference? It is definitely true that the number of elected city councilors is greater in number in larger cities in our network. In Washington, DC, for instance, a city of almost 700,000, there are 13 members of council, while in the city of Edmonton, Canada, also in our network, with an even larger population of about a million, the city council is equally large – 13 councilors (12 plus the

mayor). In these cities each elected council member has more than 50,000 constituents to listen to, consult and ultimately represent.

In smaller cities this is quite different, While Fremantle only has a population of 31,000 it also has a city council with 13 members, the same size as Edmonton and Washington, though these cities have much larger populations. The number of constituents represented by each elected councilor in Fremantle is in contrast a remarkably small 2000 citizens, perhaps allowing a level of consultation and interaction with constituents that is simply impossible in larger cities, though what this might mean for the priority given to nature is not clear. Advocates for more democratic local government argue often for the need to expand a city council as a city's population grows.

My hunch about the adoption of a nature vision is that in small cities it becomes less difficult to reach consensus around such ideas; there are fewer political actors, fewer powerbrokers and of course fewer residents and citizens to reach or engage and perhaps fewer who would object. But is there something more specific about nature – imaginary that makes it suited to smaller cities – it is harder, for example, to imagine a large and very diverse city fully coalescing around or embracing one coherent vision. Perhaps such a dynamic could happen at the level of the neighborhood (more on the scale of a small city) but there may be too many competing ideas and factions in larger cities to allow this kind of unity of purpose or vision.

When cities join the Biophilic Cities Network this alone is a statement of the values and vision of a city, and the effects of joining are worthy of study. Does the joining and the designation "biophilic city" serve to solidify a nature path for that city or reinforce its nature values, and ultimately (in turn) serve to shape the kind of city it becomes? This is perhaps a longer-term project and may be too short a time to tell, but anecdotally it does seem to be the case that a city's joining serves to strengthen the position of nature values. The recent case in Reston of a highly controversial proposal by a developer to repurpose a golf course (to housing and public park) may serve as an example. Here, citizen opposition to the proposal (and necessary change to the city's master plan) was instrumental in saving the golf course as an important greenspace for the community, an outcome viewed as consistent with its biophilic cities status (e.g. see Britt, 2020; Hobson, 2020). Interestingly, we have now seen the first candidate running for the Reston Association Board (essentially the equivalent of a city council there) with a platform that specifically embraces the vision of biophilic cities.

One intriguing question is whether city size affects in any meaningful way the moral and legal status of non-human life. Curridabat's (political) declaration that birds, bees and plants are citizens is impressive and compelling, and a positive step on the way to becoming a truly biophilic, multispecies city. Yet, at the same time it has been in much larger cities, Toronto and San Francisco are key examples, where mandatory bird-friendly design standards have been adopted (though they are still unusual among cities overall). There is an important open question here as to whether non-human species are more likely on the minds of residents of smaller cities, and more likely to be viewed as worthy of protection than in larger cities. Does (again) the longer list of more pressing big-city problems, from homelessness to gun violence, tend to undermine or diminish the importance given to non-human life?

There is an open question about the devising of new and different ways to connect residents to nature and it does seem that there is greater flexibility in smaller cities to try out and test new ideas. The implications of failure are perhaps lower, and there may be more latitude on the part of key individuals – such as a parks director or a mayor – to try something different.

Are smaller cities better laboratories for the testing of new biophilic ideas and approaches? It is not clear, but it does seem that in cities like Fremantle more testing and experimentation is possible, at least this seems so anecdotally. An example is the Green Skins initiative a few years ago, where prototypes of green walls were installed and residents' reactions to them recorded (e.g. Soderlund, 2017). My sense is that many smaller cities are able to experiment around nature in ways that might be difficult in larger cities.

A related set of questions has to do with the impediments or obstacles to biophilic design and planning and whether they are qualitatively different in smaller versus larger cities. There are many different kinds of obstacles that might need overcoming when it comes to thinking about nature. Many are endemic and probably fairly universal, such as the short-termism and short-sightedness of most elected bodies. A vision of a nature-immersive city, and certainly a nature-conserving city, ideally requires a longer-term perspective and a care for people and animals living at potentially quite distant points in the future. There are some promising process innovations and experiments aimed at getting local officials to think longer-term, for instance the Japanese Future Design Movement (e.g. see Krznaric, 2020), that seem especially suited to smaller cities and towns. Will it be harder for larger cities, with larger more cumbersome political and governmental structures, to foster this needed sense of care and empathy for the future?

Another common obstacle for many cities is financial. How will a project or initiative be paid for? Are the financial obstacles to biophilic city planning greater in larger cities where perhaps there are many more competing demands on resources, schools, infrastructure, policing, to name a few? Nature is less likely to receive the priority funding it might have in smaller cities. Are smaller cities generally more fiscally resilient and in better financial health?

Many of the best initiatives described here rely on the ability of a city to directly communicate with its residents, whether this takes the form of advertising nature events and opportunities, such as participating in an upcoming BioBlitz or an afterschool bird walk, or simply updating the public on important biophilic improvements and plans, for instance, the intention to convert vacant land to gardens. Does the size of the city make such direct communication harder or easier (or just different)? Does the ability to effectively communicate depend more on factors other than city size, such as available budget, the presence of effective communicators on staff and the desire to communicate?

There are clearly differences between cities in terms of the sophistication and capability of their staff and planning systems. We have seen a trend, for example, in the development and application of new tools for including nature and green elements into new development in cities. Our partner city San Francisco implements a Better Roofs Ordinance, mandating either a green roof or a solar roof, or a combination of these, for all structures. Similarly, Toronto enforces a comprehensive and sophisticated set of design requirements through the so-called Toronto Green Standard, including such things as green rooftops and bird-friendly design standards. Smaller cities tend not to be places where we find such codes, and this may be in part why smaller cities like Reston and Fremantle struggle with managing the pressures of greater density. There are interesting planning and policy implementations here, suggesting that while it may be easier to coalesce around a coherent nature vision in smaller cities, those cities may need some help in effectively implementing that vision (e.g. perhaps by joining with larger cities or seeking help from a regional agency or nonprofit think tank).

It would be interesting to better understand how the size of a city contributes (or not) to its political culture as well. Do elected officials in smaller cities find it easier to campaign on a nature-supportive agenda than is the case in larger cities, again where the range of serious issues and concerns is greater and competition among them is higher?

Another important set of questions has to do with whether the size of a city suggests particular kinds of biophilic design and planning tools or strategies.

Are some tools or techniques better suited to smaller cities, and which are more appropriate in larger cities? This remains an important question.

What role does the pace of life in small cities play, if any? Is there a closer connection to nature to begin with, and a set of social and geographical conditions where residents are simply more likely to be inclined to watch and listen to birds, for example, or to spend time in a nearby park?

Moreover, does the size of the city determine the "administrative remoteness" (or even geographical remoteness) of the city government – that the parks director and staff are located in offices farther away from where many people in a larger city live? Or the people and agencies with responsibility to manage parks and nature, thus making it harder for residents to exert control or to engage in meaningful co-management of this nature?

One especially interesting category of open questions has to do with explaining the investments and actions taken by residents to grow nature or support nature around their home and in their neighborhoods, irrespective of or disconnected from official local programs. Does life in a smaller city make such personal nature commitments more likely?

An especially compelling anecdote comes from Fremantle and especially the story of south Fremantle. Here there is a kind of "Spontaneous Biophilia" that has taken hold (building a bit on the language of Peter Del Tredici, 2010), and not fully or adequately explained by programs or policies of the local council. Walking around this neighborhood there is an unusual array of homeowner choices and decisions that add to nature or reference nature. There is some connection to local policy to be sure (and one unique policy has been to permit, even encourage, homeowners to personalize the sidewalks when built, and there are many places where artistic embellishments often with shells and marine themes can be seen in the pavement). But are such biophilic neighborhoods better explained through a dynamic of residents seeing and emulating what others have done, being inspired by the actions others have taken and even through informal exchange of design ideas and materials?

And if these are some of the dynamics that explain biophilia on the ground, perhaps especially in smaller cities, it may be possible to activate or ignite such efforts, setting in motion a celebration, caring for and growing of nature that may be more impactful than any code or mandate.

Many of these questions involve consideration of what it will take to shift a city in the direction of a "culture of biophilia." Biophilic cities, we are often

suggesting, are more than places with lots of parks and trees. They are places where residents and citizens actively care about nature, and actively engage with it. They spend more time outside, they listen to and watch birds, they are curious and pay attention to the nature around them. I suspect that the progress in the direction of achieving a truly biophilic urban culture may be harder in a larger city, but this, like so many of the questions I have posed here, demands future research and debate.

Suggestions for further reading

Beatley, T. 2004. *Native to nowhere: Home and community in a global age*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

A comprehensive discussion of the many different aspects and elements that make up a community including the role of nature and natural systems. The book argues for the importance of creating and strengthening unique places and describes many cities and communities around the world that have taken steps in this direction. A key challenge is to resist sameness and to instill a deeper sense of connection and caring for the places in which we live.

Beatley, T. 2017. *Handbook of biophilic city planning and design*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

This book presents in detail the vision of biophilic cities and the cities around the United States and the world that have emerged as leaders and pioneers in this global movement. The book discusses the key elements in this new vision of cities and urbanism and the different programs and practices utilized by these leading cities. The book includes detailed chapters of a number of early leaders including San Francisco, Singapore, Milwaukee, Portland, Birmingham (UK) and Vitoria-Gasteiz (Spain), among others. The book describes the history and functioning of the international Biophilic Cities Network.

Soderlund, J. 2019. *The emergence of biophilic design*. Cham: Springer.

This book provides an extensive discussion of the many voices, people and communities that have been important in the emergence of biophilic design. The result of extensive interviews with leading thinkers and practitioners, it provides a comprehensive discussion of the main ideas, theory and history of biophilic design.

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11 Public policy and small and medium-sized towns

David Kaufmann and Stefan Wittwer

Introduction: public policies and small and medium-sized towns

Local governments possess different degrees of autonomy in policy-making and implementation. On the one hand, there is the institutional autonomy that regulates what kind of formal policy-making competencies local governments have. On the other hand, local governments differ in their policy-making and implementation capacity because of structural factors such as size, wealth, expertise and other resources. Whereas the national institutional framework determines the institutional autonomy and it is largely the same for all local governments in one given national state (Ladner et al., 2016), the structural capacity varies. Small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs) often have more economic and political power than small municipalities but tend to be curtailed with regard to their structural capacity compared to larger cities and metropolitan centres. However, this does not imply that SMSTs cannot play a decisive role in designing and implementing public policy. SMSTs can pursue different strategies such as taking advantage of place-specific factors, cooperating with a variety of actors and tapping into policy-making venues at different governmental levels. In this chapter, we will shed light on what kind of public policies SMSTs formulate and how they can shape their development with public policies. To do so, we conceptually distinguish between three steps in the policy-making process (policy design, policy implementation, and policy impact) and between substantive and procedural elements of policy-making.

As a public policy, we understand public action, from signals of intent to tangible outputs and outcomes, taken by different actors in order to deal with issues defined as public problems (Cairney, 2020). Local governments are thereby central actors in policy-making processes since they possess the democratic legitimacy to design and implement public policies, but they often do so in cooperation with other public bodies, businesses, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community organizations, or individuals. In this chapter, we

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look at policy-making processes of SMSTs, where local governments design and implement public policies alone or in cooperation with other actors.

Public policy research focuses on different steps in the policy-making process and considers public policy as a social and political process rather than a static regulation. We can employ the heuristic lens of the policy cycle to conceptualize different overlapping but distinct phases that each includes, with specific sets of actors and decisions (Jann and Wegrich, 2007). In its simple version, the three steps of the policy cycle include: (1) how and by whom policies are formulated and designed (policy design); (2) how and by whom policies are implemented (policy implementation); and (3) how the policy constitutes to solving the public problem (policy impact) (Jann and Wegrich, 2007).

During this process, substantive and procedural aspects are of interest for the research of public policy (Howlett, 2000). Substantive aspects address the 'what', i.e. the content of the public policies, while the procedural aspects address the 'how', i.e. how SMSTs decide the content of a policy and how they implement it. Typical content of public policies at the local level in Western countries are questions of education, infrastructure, spatial planning or economic development (Ladner et al., 2016). The procedural dimension can be conceptualized by multilevel governance (MLG) that describes multiple and simultaneously local policy-making and implementation activities on different levels and including different actors (Hooghe and Marks, 2003). The following four dimensions are most present in the literature: urban (i.e. local), horizontal, vertical, and international (e.g. Kübler and Pagano, 2012). The local dimension captures the involvement of non-state actors in local policy-making, the horizontal dimension includes policy coordination in the region, the vertical dimension accounts for policy interactions with supra-local state levels, and the international dimension examines international city-to-city relations. It is important to note that MLG theorizes simultaneous policy-making activities beyond formal policy-making hierarchies (Kaufmann and Sidney, 2020).

Along those four MLG dimensions, we can detect how SMSTs try to cope with their policy-making capacities that are limited due to structural and institutional constraints. To address their limited capacity, SMSTs can cooperate with NGOs, community organizations, or businesses actors on the local level to increase their capacity to act. To enhance their limited territorial policy influence, local governments can engage in horizontal policy coordination on the regional level with the aim to ensure policy coherence (Kaufmann and Sager, 2019). The small-scale territory of local governments and the often transboundary characteristic of sustainability issues makes policy coordination in the functional region (e.g. metropolitan region) essential (Watson, 2021). To

address the constraints by supra-local laws and policies, SMSTs can engage in vertical political interactions with higher-tier governments beyond formal hierarchical lines of communication. In addition, we see the rise of international city-to-city networks as important vehicles for expanding the role and influence of cities (Keiner and Kim, 2007).

In this chapter, we argue that a particular focus on SMSTs and public policies is an interesting lens for future research on SMSTs. In the first part of the chapter, we discuss the literature on substantive and procedural aspects of public policies based on the three steps of the policy-making process by providing examples from Western Europe and the United States. In the second part, we propose paths for further research that focus on: (1) linking the three steps of the policy-making process; (2) public policies beyond economic and spatial development; and (3) horizontal and vertical cooperation and positioning strategies of SMSTs.

Policy-making process of SMSTs

This chapter discusses how research on SMSTs addresses the different steps in the process of a public policy: policy design, implementation, and impact.

Policy design: what policies do SMSTs formulate and what explains the differences?

Research with a focus on policy design focuses on describing and explaining different or particularly interesting policy designs. The substantive focus in the literature on SMSTs often lies on different aspects of local and regional economic development (Kaufmann and Wittwer, 2019; Knox and Mayer, 2009; Lazzeroni, 2020; Lorentzen and van Heur, 2012; Serrano-López et al., 2019) and spatial planning (Hamdouch et al., 2017a; Kaufmann and Meili, 2019). Furthermore, the majority of the research is conducted in national contexts where municipalities have a high autonomy such as Germany, Sweden, or Switzerland.

Kaufmann and Meili (2019) show that local spatial planning strategies are important instruments to manage economic growth and thus spatial planning and economic development is often entangled in SMSTs. Hermelin and Trygg (2021) show that larger cities in Sweden work with a broader repertoire of local development policies (e.g. self-branding activities or business support) than towns and small municipalities. Naldi et al. (2020) focus on the role of

vulnerability and find that Swedish SMSTs act as either entrepreneurs, local innovators or disengaged risk takers depending on their entrepreneurial orientation. Lazzeroni (2020) also focuses on vulnerable towns and examines how economic and social decline affects historical industrial towns and how they try to become resilient to economic transformation.

A crucial question in the literature often is whether and how SMSTs are able to steer their local development (Kaufmann and Wittwer, 2019; Servillo et al., 2017). The literature highlights the important role of specific spatial, political, demographic, or economic contexts, different constraints that SMSTs have to navigate, and the role of different actors in policy-making. A strong focus in the literature is on explaining these differences by looking at the location of SMSTs within settlement systems. The distance to a metropolitan centre for example is found to be an important factor for explaining different functions and economic characteristics of SMSTs (Hamdouch et al., 2017b; Kaufmann and Meili, 2019; Polèse and Shearmur, 2006; Wittwer, 2021). Kaufmann and Arnold (2018) show how SMSTs are constrained by supra-local institutions but that they can also use their space-specific assets to design different locational policies adjusted to their strategies and needs. Other recent studies examine if different local party-political compositions lead to different local policies. They find clues that more left-leaning German and Swiss SMSTs tend to formulate more progressive policies and have a stronger policy focus on the residential economy than on the export-based economy (Beveridge and Naumann, 2021; Wittwer, 2021). In a comparison of nine Swiss SMSTs, Devecchi (2016) shows that differences in governance strategies for town development, the professionalization of the administration, growth contexts, as well as land prices matter for explaining different policies in these SMSTs.

These debates mostly focus on the SMSTs as collective institutional actors. However, local policy-making can also be studied from an actor perspective at the micro-level. Research on different economic development strategies often focuses on the role of local entrepreneurs, local communities, and the interaction with local institutions (Hamdouch et al., 2017a; Knox and Mayer, 2009; Lazzeroni, 2020; Mayer et al., 2016). Compared to larger cities, single individuals and firms from the private sector, for example locally rooted businesses, have a larger impact on local development while the NGOs or community organizations are less organized at the smaller scale of SMSTs (see e.g. Meili and Shearmur, 2019).

While there is a strong focus on economic and spatial development strategies in the research on public policies in SMSTs, several studies also analyse policy designs in different policy areas. Van Breugel (2020), for example, analyses

and compares migration policies in Dutch towns and cities of different size. She finds that local migration diversity policies differ regarding proactive or reactive approaches, embeddedness in policy domains, and an orientation on cultural diversity. Ambrosini (2013) studies local migration policies in diverse local governments in northern Italy and finds that there are inclusionary policies with regard to education, health, and social welfare, but also very strong exclusionary policies and discriminatory rhetoric. Hamin et al. (2014) examine barriers to climate adaption in small towns and cities in coastal Massachusetts. They find that most of the small towns and cities do not have policies to address future climate change at all, mainly because of a lack of resources, high private property values, and a focus on addressing current hazards instead of potential future threats. There are also policy activities in the areas of mobility and digital transformation in SMSTs, yet they are not systematically studied and are mostly covered in policy reports (see e.g. ARL, 2019 for German SMSTs).

From a procedural perspective, the question is not explaining the policy design itself, but how SMSTs try to engage in policy-making to overcome their manifold constraints. If SMSTs are limited in their capacity of independently steering their local development, it becomes evident to focus on the role of cooperation between SMSTs and other municipalities and cooperation with higher-tier institutionalized subnational or national levels.

The debate on intermunicipal cooperation has a long tradition in public policy and political science. Local governments cooperate based on specific policies with different degrees of institutionalized governance arrangements (e.g. contracts, agreements, codes of conduct, regional administrative offices). For SMSTs, questions of cooperation can be particularly interesting. They can decide to either engage in cooperation with large cities, for example in polycentric or metropolitan regions (Meijers et al., 2018), or they can cooperate with other SMSTs and municipalities in order to strengthen their political and economic position towards larger cities. Wittwer (2020) distinguishes between Swiss SMSTs that are part of regions with multiple SMSTs or cities (polycentric regions) and SMSTs that are more isolated in their region. He then examines which factors explain that SMSTs cooperate with others in polycentric regions. On the one hand, the study shows that SMSTs with high income per inhabitant and high out-commuting patterns are less likely to cooperate with other SMSTs. This indicates that they do not see enough benefits in a potential cooperation. On the other hand, the study shows that SMSTs with a higher share of export-oriented employment and a larger population benefit more from cluster effects and may be more likely to see more benefits of cooperation (Wittwer, 2020).

How do SMSTs implement their policies?

In the implementation stage, the focus lies on the question as to who implements a policy and in which way. Next to questions of financial resources, and the organizational aspect, i.e. which actors are involved and how they cooperate, is of particular interest. The MLG concept can also be applied to the implementation stage, since SMSTs can cooperate with different actors at different levels. The size of municipalities matters for the choice of cooperation actors. Hermelin and Trygg (2021) show that Swedish cities favour relations with national agencies, while towns appreciate relations within their regions, and rural municipalities favour cooperation with other municipalities and with the European Union. The way in which SMSTs organize the implementation of public policies varies not only between SMSTs of different countries, but also within the same country. Wittwer (2020), for example, shows that some Swiss SMSTs engage in polycentric cooperation, while others only cooperate with smaller surrounding municipalities (i.e. monocentric cooperation) or do not cooperate at all. Regional polycentric cooperation consists of more cross-border cooperation, stronger agency, and rather includes private actors compared to monocentric cooperation.

These different ways of cooperation and governance of policy implementation can have an impact on the outputs of a policy. For transport and land use policy implementation in metropolitan regions consisting of small municipalities, SMSTs, and a core city, Sager (2005) examines how implementation has an impact on coordination and the compliance of municipalities in urban areas to implement the policy decision. He shows that a more centralized and professional bureaucracy increases the quality of coordination and implementation (Sager, 2005). His finding for the relevance of bureaucrats as policy professionals for regional cooperation is supported by a study by Gerber and Gibson (2009), which examines how different regional governance arrangements shape transportation policy in the United States. They find that organizations that rely more on elected officials (i.e. local council members, mayors) favour transportation funding for local projects such as a single bridge repair. Organizations that rely more on policy professionals (i.e. bureaucrats, technocrats) and regions that are wealthier and have a larger staff spend a larger share on regional projects that traverse local government boundaries such as area-wide congestion management programs. They conclude that local officials favour 'expenditures on projects that have a strong targeted dimension that promotes credit claiming' (Gerber and Gibson, 2009, p. 637), while policy professionals are supposed to 'think outside the electoral box and towards meeting long-term environmental and economic goals' (p. 637).

Next to elected officials and bureaucrats, private actors and citizens are also involved in policy implementation. Mayer et al. (2016), for example, discuss the contribution of private rural entrepreneurs with urban linkages in decreasing spatial disparities between centres and peripheries. Verhoeven (2021) studies local resistance to the implementation of carbon capture, storage facilities, and windfarms in Dutch SMSTs. He finds that local governmental players and non-governmental allies have a strong role in this implementation resistance and that they employ different rhetorical critiques against such projects. Other research looks at successful local strategies by NGOs, activists, and local and provincial governments in together resisting the production of shale gas in the Netherlands (Metze, 2018) and United States local communities (Deitrick and Murtazashvili, 2021).

Research on SMSTs has also put emphasis on strategic cooperation with institutions at higher governmental levels or with municipalities in other countries (Döringer, 2020; Keiner and Kim, 2007; Knox and Mayer, 2009; Serrano and Hamdouch, 2017). Knox and Mayer (2009) see the advantages of smaller cities to cooperate internationally in networking for learning and the spread of best practices. Such a cooperation strategy can be promising for SMSTs because it gives local governments more visibility, potential imitators, and more political power towards other institutional levels (Wittwer et al., 2021). The last point is particularly relevant if the goals of the policy to some degree conflict with the direction of policies at higher institutional levels.

In countries that grant only little institutional autonomy to SMSTs such as France, their influence in designing public policies is limited. However, SMSTs still have leeway in implementing them (see e.g. Atkinson, 2017). For the implementation stage in those countries, questions of cooperation with other actors such as local businesses or other cities become particularly relevant (e.g. Serrano and Hamdouch, 2017).

What is the impact of public policies in SMSTs?

Research focusing on the third step of the policy-making process addresses questions of the consequences of a policy. Thereby, the focus in policy impact research can lie in a comparison of different policy designs, a focus on different implementation strategies of similar policy designs, or on both. Comparisons of European cities of different sizes, for example, show that smaller cities in Europe have similar growth rates compared to larger cities (Dijkstra et al., 2013; Parkinson et al., 2015).

In a comparison of all 117 polycentric regions in Europe, Meijers et al. (2018) examine if the level of integration between cities in these polycentric regions can explain performance measured as a level of metropolitan functions (e.g. presence of universities, headquarters of firms, cultural events, major sports events and others). They find that functional integration measured in road and rail connections has the strongest effect on performance, but also that cooperation in metropolitan bodies (Meijers et al., 2018) and the size of a city (Meijers et al., 2016) increases the level of metropolitan functions. Other international studies comparing economic performance in polycentric and monocentric regions find mixed evidence (Brezzi and Veneri, 2015; Li et al., 2022). Brezzi and Veneri (2015) show in an analysis of regions in states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development that polycentric regions with more small and medium-sized functional urban regions have a lower gross domestic product per capita than monocentric regions. On a country level, however, countries with more polycentric regions have a higher gross domestic product per capita.

Research hence emphasizes the importance of regional embeddedness for economic growth. These findings are also supported in research that solely examines SMSTs. Hamdouch et al. (2017b) find four patterns of how SMSTs in Europe perform regarding growth rates in population and employment: restructuring and potential developing SMSTs, dynamic SMSTs, declining SMSTs, and restructuring SMSTs (p. 466). Fifty-five per cent of the 31 SMSTs in their sample are dynamic towns and those dynamic towns are almost all either well networked with other cities or based in an agglomeration rather than autonomous. This is also in line with the findings of a study by Kaufmann and Wittwer (2019). They find that Swiss SMSTs that are regionally embedded displayed a systematically higher employment development than SMSTs that are not embedded in dynamic polycentric networks.

A research agenda for researching public policies in SMSTs

The current state of research on public policies in SMSTs has already produced a great literature that has examined parts of the different aspects of the policy process. However, we suggest that future research could strengthen the public policy aspects of SMSTs in three ways. First, we suggest to better link the three steps of the policy-making process in order to do justice to policy as a process and to come up with different measures to assess policy impact (steps A, B and C in Figure 11.1; see also Table 11.1). Second, the substantive focus of SMST

studies on economic and spatial development could be expanded to cover a more diverse set of policy areas (letter D in Figure 11.1). Third, from a procedural perspective, research on cooperation should not only focus on functional reasons but also on political advantages of cooperation (letter E in Figure 11.1). We discuss these three aspects in the next paragraphs.
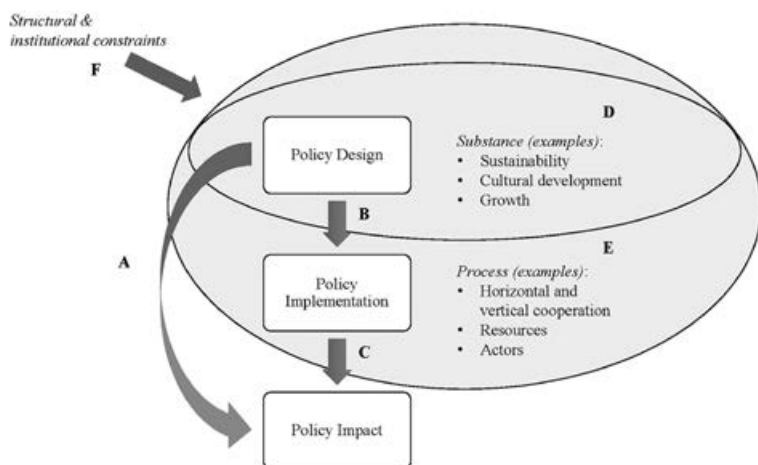
Note: The figure illustrates the public policy process and shows in which areas the aspects of substance and process are relevant. The bold letters designate aspects that research on public policies in SMSTs address (see Table 11.1).

Figure 11.1   Three steps of a public policy and their interlinkage

From a policy process perspective, there should be a better link between the different elements of a policy process. Often, the focus in SMST research either lies on conceptualizing and explaining different policy designs, on examining different ways of implementation and cooperation, or on studying why SMSTs develop differently. We propose that the policy design could be better linked to policy impact through studying implementation as the element that puts policy design into action. Similarly, a systematic policy evaluation examines how a policy addresses its targets (e.g. by persuading, incentivizing, or forcing people to buy more in local stores), whether and how the targets adapt their behaviour (e.g. buying more local products), and if this behavioural change leads to the desired effects (e.g. stopping the closure of local stores). SMST policy research could follow such well-defined steps of a policy evaluation (Vedung, 2000) and, as result, could provide clear policy recommendations.

Table 11.1   Explanation and examples for Figure 11.1

Letter	Key research question	Example in relation to self-branding as a sustainable town
A	How does the policy design influence the policy impact?	Does self-branding as a sustainable town lead to a public image of this town as a sustainability pioneer?
B	How does the policy design structure the policy implementation?	Do SMSTs cooperate with surrounding municipalities to promote a label of a sustainable region?
C	How does the policy implementation influence the policy impact?	Do regional self-branding strategies with a more professionalized agency lead to more visibility than if an SMST does it alone?
D	What policies do SMSTs formulate and what explains the difference?	Why do SMSTs employ different self-branding policies and why are some SMSTs more proactive in self-branding activities than others?
E	How do SMSTs implement their policies?	Why do some SMSTs engage in intermunicipal cooperation or provide more personal resources to self-branding activities while others do not?
F	How do structural and institutional constraints affect the design, implementation, or impact of a policy?	Do larger and more autonomous SMSTs implement more self-branding policies than small municipalities embedded in a metropolitan region?

The impact of policy designs could be examined by comparative case study designs (Seawright and Gerring, 2008; Sellers, 2019). For example, a most similar case study design would compare similar local governments with different policy designs, or similar local governments that employ similar policy designs but different implementation strategies. A most different case study design would focus on different SMSTs that perform similarly with regard to policy success or failure. When comparing public policies or their implementation among SMSTs, institutional constraints such as local autonomy or influence of national-level and structural constraints such as size, socio-demographics, economic structure, or location can vary considerably. Research designs that 'address both national and subnational variations, the relationships between them, and the transnational influences and processes that increasingly play a role in both' (Sellers, 2019, p. 100) can help to explain how these constraints affect the design, implementation, and ultimately the success of a policy (see letter F in Figure 11.1).

From a substantive perspective, we suggest increasing the diversity of the studied policies by examining policies beyond economic and spatial development. While urban research increasingly focuses on the role of cities in advancing the social, ecological, and economic dimensions of sustainable development (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2020; Kaufmann and Sidney, 2020), we know that there are also interesting and relevant sustainable development policies in SMSTs (see e.g. Knox and Mayer, 2009) as well as progressive policy agendas regarding social justice, citizenship, and democracy (see e.g. Beveridge and Naumann, 2021). In a world of limited and decreasing resources, it is crucial to not only focus on cities and countries, but also on how smaller municipalities such as SMSTs can contribute to sustainable development. We can detect an upcoming research agenda around international examples of sustainability policies that focus on green, slow, or de-growth. Sonderborg, a Danish SMST, for example, implements a town-wide carbon-neutral development strategy that is often presented as a lighthouse project at national and international levels (Wittwer et al., 2021). Wolfhagen (Germany) organizes its energy provision through a public–common partnership (Beveridge and Naumann, 2021). Some United Kingdom cities and towns pursue the idea of community wealth building that proposes a 'more sustainable self-enclosed economy of recirculating wealth' as a counter ideal to economic growth imperatives (Thompson, 2021, p. 331).

Sustainable development policies, especially when focusing on the ecological dimension, are often supported and appreciated by supra-local levels. However, recent research also puts an emphasis on the role of cities and municipalities in policies that are in conflict with the national level. New Municipalism, for example, focuses on the 'radical democratic autonomy of municipalities over political and economic life vis-à-vis the nation-state' (Thompson, 2021, p. 317) and 'more proactive, contentious, expansive programmes for transformation of state/capitalist social relations' (Thompson, 2021, p. 318). Others focus less on radical institutional restructuration but on similar goals of post-growth geographies (Schmid, 2019) or on the stabilizing role of the foundational economy as the part of the economy that meets the everyday needs of citizens (e.g. for mobility, utilities or food) (Engelen et al., 2017). Interesting examples that focus on the reception and socio-economic integration of refugees and other forced migrants despite obstructive national migration policies can be found in Riace (Italy) (Driel, 2020) or in rural communities in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark (Søholt et al., 2018). Another interesting example of progressive social policies can be found in the small rustbelt city of Ypsilanti (United States) where an LGBTQ community was formed beyond an urban centre (Currans, 2021). These inclusive social policies are often developed and pushed forward by social movements, the civil society, or individual residents.

While there are collections of these inclusive and progressive policies (e.g. www.urbanalternatives.org or www.fearlesscities.com) and research presents them as best practices, systematic research on explaining different designs, implementation, and their impacts is scarce.

From a procedural perspective, it would be interesting to study how SMSTs cooperate with each other, with other supra-local governments, and non-public actors in manifold ways. Keiner and Kim (2007) and Knox and Mayer (2009) discuss how interlocal cooperating can put innovative solutions to national and international agendas and how policies can diffuse to other entities. A focus on more conflictive policies (like alternative economic development models or pro-migration policies) also reveals new ways of cooperation and positioning. SMSTs can pursue a strategy of building pressure from below. They can try to generate political mass by winning over partner cities and towns, thereby building pressure towards achieving national policy change. International coordination can thereby make their own solutions visible, draw attention to problems, and bring on board new partners. Sometimes cities and towns deliberately skip the national level and instead seek cooperation partners at the international level (Wittwer et al., 2021). Future research could contribute to understanding these different cooperation and positioning strategies, as well as their chances and risks in the design and implementation stage.

Suggestions for further reading

Beveridge, R. and Naumann, M. 2021. Progressive urbanism in small towns: The contingencies of governing from the left. *Urban Affairs Review*. 1–30.

In this article, Beveridge and Naumann discuss progressive urban agendas of left mayors regarding social justice, citizenship, and democracy focusing on German SMSTs. They address questions of progressive policy-making and implementation (i.e. cooperation) in areas that are not in line with higher-level policy agendas and discuss constraints for progressive policies in SMSTs.

Kaufmann, D. and Meili, R. 2019. Leaves in the wind? Local policies of small and medium-sized towns in metropolitan regions. *European Planning Studies*. **27**(1), 21–41.

This article examines how institutional and structural constraints affect the economic specialization of four Swiss SMSTs and in what way local policies and cooperation strategies are developed to overcome these constraints with the goal to more independently steer their local development. They hence not

only emphasize the role of constraints that SMSTs face but also discuss how SMSTs can shape their development.

Sellers, J. 2019. From within to between nations: Subnational comparison across borders. *Perspectives on Politics*. **17**(1), 85–105.

In this article, Sellers argues for more research that focuses on systematic subnational comparison and discusses strengths and weaknesses of different research designs. The paper addresses the first aspect of our research agenda because it discusses approaches that help to systematically compare different policy-making steps within and between national states.

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12   Agents of change in small and medium-sized towns

Arnault Morisson

Introduction

The study of small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs) is often neglected in economic geography due to their perceived institutional and economic inertia (Servillo et al., 2017). Compared to metropolitan areas, SMSTs are often less diversified, which makes path creation more difficult (Neffke et al., 2011; Pylak and Kogler, 2021), and they are prone to political and functional lock-ins due to dominant industrial structures (Bole et al., 2020; Grabher, 1993). They also frequently have less policy autonomy with which to 'manage' their socio-economic development (Hamdouch et al., 2017), enjoy higher social capital and trust that favour conformism and cognitive lock-ins (Beer and Clower, 2014; Mayer and Knox, 2009; Roundy, 2017), and suffer from social challenges such as an ageing population and brain drain (Servillo et al., 2017). These challenges offer researchers who use the agency's framework a highly relevant perspective for theory building and policymaking to explore how and why agents of change in SMSTs can break lock-ins and promote economic and institutional changes. Indeed, SMSTs offer researchers a large variety of institutional contexts for the study of agents of change, allowing for comparative approaches to identify mechanisms that either enable or hinder change agency. Moreover, the large variety of institutional contexts allows researchers to better identify the interplay between agents of change and their broader socio-economic impacts. Finally, the study of agents of change in SMSTs participates in responding to pressing policy issues regarding economic and political divergences between the core and periphery (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) and in designing more contextualised place-based policies for SMSTs (Barca et al., 2012; Tödtling and Trippl, 2005).

The literature in economic geography is increasingly interested in understanding the role of human agency and agents' actions in producing changes in local and regional development (see Döringer, 2020a; Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020; Miörner, 2020; Morisson and Mayer, 2021). Human agency stands for 'the

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ability of people to act, usually regarded as emerging from consciously held intentions, and as resulting in observable effects in the human world' (Gregory et al., 2009, p. 347). In economic geography, agents of change are studied within the neo-Schumpeterian tradition where multiple types of entrepreneurs act to produce a change (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020). Depending on their intentions towards change, agents of change can be institutional entrepreneurs (Weik, 2011), policy entrepreneurs (Brouwer and Huitema, 2018), governance entrepreneurs (Döringer, 2020a; Willi et al., 2018a) or Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneurs (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020), and can rally multiple actors around a common vision of the future to form place-based leadership (Beer and Clower, 2014; Sotarauta, 2016).

Research on agents of change is often focused on new industrial path development, which is the outcome of existing localised capabilities and path-dependent processes (Hassink et al., 2019). Agents of change are seen as actors who can break existing path dependencies to drive regional changes through their actions (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020). The study of agents of change complements the literature on new industrial path development with a micro-perspective compared with the macro-perspective taken in evolutionary economy geography (Asheim et al., 2011; Balland et al., 2019) and the system perspective taken in regional innovation systems (Hassink et al., 2019). Moreover, agents of change offer a bridge to explore co-evolutionary mechanisms between path development and institutional changes thus linking regional actions to broader structural transformations (Gong and Hassink, 2019; Morisson and Panetti, 2020). Research on agents of change aims to better understand outlier cases that don't follow path-dependent processes, such as unrelated path creation in unlikely places or regions overcoming lock-ins (Döringer, 2020a; Morisson and Mayer, 2021).

Agents of change

Why focus on small and medium-sized towns?

Agents of change are the actors (a person or group of people) leveraging their power, knowledge, and connections to strategically promote socio-institutional changes and/or new industrial path development. Change agency offers many promising research agendas in economic geography, especially in the context of SMSTs. Regional innovation studies tend to bypass the micro-perspective and thus the role of agents of change and their actions, which leads to structural changes that focus on the macro-perspective (Sotarauta, 2017; Uyarra et

al., 2017). The study of agents of change is especially relevant for SMSTs due to their large variety of institutional contexts and thus possible case studies. SMSTs are prone to more research and policy challenges than metropolitan areas, including lock-ins, lack of scientific and technological endowments, lack of innovative entrepreneurship, institutional inertia, brain drain, conformism due to high social capital, rise in populist political parties, and more (Servillo et al., 2017). SMSTs offer a fertile ground for research on agents of change for their theoretical and pragmatic importance due to their socio-economic challenges. Namely, SMSTs allow researchers to identify agents and causal mechanisms of changes more easily than in large metropolitan regions due to SMSTs' strong social capital and the organisational thinness.

Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneurs

In economic geography, one of the most studied agents of change is the Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneur: a person or group of people who has the capacity, motivation, and willingness to transform an idea into an innovation and who thus employs 'the gale of creative destruction' to replace inferior innovations and incumbents (Schumpeter, 1942). Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneurship is a risk-taking and non-routine behaviour to realise new possibilities, combinations, and practical actualisation (Feldman et al., 2005; Neffke et al., 2011; Strambach and Klement, 2012). Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneurs are essential for economic transformation, as they create new paths that display growth in new industries and economic activities (Hassink et al., 2019). Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneurs are often seen as a metropolitan phenomenon and in turn have become the centre of policy actions to foster urban entrepreneurial ecosystems (see Adler et al., 2019; Low and Isserman, 2015; Mack and Mayer, 2016). Compared to metropolitan areas, however, SMSTs can offer many advantages to Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneurs such as lower costs, small-scale social networks, lifestyle preferences, trust and social capital, market niches, and homophily (Mayer and Baumgartner, 2014; Morisson and Mayer, 2021; Roundy, 2017; Salder and Bryson, 2019). In SMSTs, Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneurs are affected by different pull (greater independence) and push (lack of jobs in area of expertise) factors compared to metropolitan regions. Thus, Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneurs in SMSTs must be addressed with further research (Mayer and Motoyama, 2020).

Institutional entrepreneurs

Institutional entrepreneurs are actors who mobilise resources, power, and competences to transform existing institutions and introduce new institutions

or institutional arrangements (Battilana et al., 2009; Sotarauta and Pulkkinen, 2011). Institutional entrepreneurs usually have a strong interest in shaping institutional arrangements and institutional changes and they tend to act when they identify windows of opportunity (Battilana et al., 2009). In the context of SMSTs, institutional entrepreneurs are the agents who promote institutional changes in formal or informal institutions that affect the local context (North, 1990). Formal institutions include the 'rules that humans devise', such as laws, government regulations, formal instructions, and property rights, that affect transaction costs (North, 1990, p. 4). Informal institutions include 'the conventions and codes of behaviour', such as common law, customs, traditions, taboos, codes of conduct, work norms, norms of cooperation, conventions, and practices (Edquist and Johnson, 1997; North, 1990, p. 4). Institutional changes are especially important in a period of path creation and transformation to better align institutions and the emerging techno-economic structures (Morisson and Panetti, 2020; Trippl et al., 2020). Institutional entrepreneurs create the opportunities for the emergence of new paths, which can offer a theoretical understanding of how paths emerge in less diversified SMSTs (Sotarauta and Mustikkamäki, 2015).

Policy entrepreneurs

Policy entrepreneurs are agents in the public sector who act to introduce policy changes. Policy entrepreneurs invest their time, resources, connections, and reputation to influence political agenda setting in the hopes of future promotions in government, interest groups, public–private organisations, or elected or appointed positions (Kingdon, 1984; Mintrom and Norman, 2009). Policy entrepreneurs are not exclusively elite bureaucrats or political leaders but can also be low-level bureaucrats (Frisch-Aviram et al., 2018; Roberts and King, 1991). According to Brouwer and Huitema (2018), policy entrepreneurs can use a diverse range of strategic behaviours – including attention- and support-seeking strategies, linking strategies, relational management strategies, and arena strategies – related to the policy proposal they wish to progress, the network environment in which they operate, and their home organisation. The behaviour of policy entrepreneurs is highly contextual, therefore making them interesting research subjects in the context of SMSTs as they have little policy autonomy and smaller financial resources with which to implement policy actions compared to metropolitan areas. In the context of SMSTs, small-scale social networks, public–private proximity, and policy windows of opportunity due to crises, public opinion changes, or elections can offer policy entrepreneurs the capacity to act to promote changes (Bakir and Jarvis, 2017).

Governance entrepreneurs

Governance entrepreneurs are the agents who aim to change or introduce governance arrangements to influence decision making (Döringer, 2020a). Regional governance relates to the vertical and horizontal coordination of regional transformation processes through collective and interactive decision making beyond administrative boundaries by state and non-state actors (Döringer, 2020a; Willi et al., 2018b). Compared to metropolitan areas, governance entrepreneurs in SMSTs can form and respond rapidly to emerging socio-economic challenges, thanks to small-scale social networks, public–private proximity, and a readiness to identify windows of opportunity. The shift towards networked forms of governance, in which multiple and diverse agents aim to address regional development, has opened a window of opportunity for agents of change (Ayres and Stafford, 2014). Regional governance is a complex process that involves multiple dynamics such as realising and enabling governance entrepreneurs and combining different strategic behaviours such as risk taking, willingness to invest personal resources, connections, and personal brokerage (Willi et al., 2018b). In the European Union, this shift towards networked governance is characterised by the 'enabling condition' of the Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) that requires regions to have specific governance arrangements that follow good governance principles such as inclusiveness and the quadruple helix model of innovation (Carayannis and Rakhmatullin, 2014; European Commission, 2018; McCann and Ortega-Argilés, 2014).

Place-based leadership

Place-based leadership is a form of collective leadership involving multiple actors who coordinate regional development efforts (Sotarauta et al., 2017). Place-based leadership does not focus on any individual charismatic agent but rather on a collective strategic agency to coordinate and rally diverse stakeholders around a common vision of the future to drive changes (Beer and Clower, 2014). Place-based leadership works across institutional, organisational, geographical, and/or sectoral boundaries to amplify the local power base and consequently strengthen the place-based capacity to influence place-based development trajectory. Thanks to stronger social capital and tight networks, SMSTs offer a favourable ground for the emergence of place-based leadership as agents of change, and challenges are easily identified. In SMSTs, the strong cognitive proximity can potentially lead to cognitive lock-in but can also be leveraged to activate place-based leadership. The broader institutional context can enable or constrain place-based leadership, as centralised governments are less likely to encourage the rise of effective local leadership (Beer and Clower, 2014; Sotarauta and Beer, 2017). In rural Australia, for instance,

leadership was restricted by the capacity of local broker agents to connect with multi-level governance structures and influence local development (Beer, 2014). Place-based leadership, either formal or informal, is an important issue for SMSTs (Atkinson, 2017). The large set of SMSTs offers the opportunity to explore outlier cases of place-based leadership across multiple institutional contexts.

Agents of change in SMSTs

The exploration of the role of agents of change in local and regional economic development offers many promising research directions. Macro-level and system-level frameworks have succumbed to the temptation to 'read off' individual behaviour from national and regional institutional structures (Gertler, 2010). In the context of SMSTs, as compared to metropolitan areas, researchers can more easily identify the agents of change and uncover the causal relational mechanisms that affect change. Moreover, research on agents of change can be especially promising in SMSTs as they offer a large set of cases across multiple institutional contexts where outliers and process-tracing methodology can better define causality between human agency, context, and economic development.

Agents of change have different intentions towards change and can take on different roles at different stages (see Figure 12.1). Agents of change are embedded in an institutional context that they jointly create. The active role of agents of change in the institutional context favours an actor-centred institutionalism, which refers to 'strategic actions and interactions of purposeful and resourceful individual and corporate actors and to the enabling, constraining, and shaping effects of given (but variable) institutional structures and institutionalised forms' (Scharpf, 1997, p. 34). For instance, Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneurs affect directly non-institutional factors (namely economic factors), which will influence other agents of change who are constructing institutional factors (see Figure 12.1). Although agents and their intentions towards change are well defined, little research has explored their interrelatedness and the causal mechanisms leading to change across different institutional contexts. The following section will delve into promising research agendas on agents of change in SMSTs.
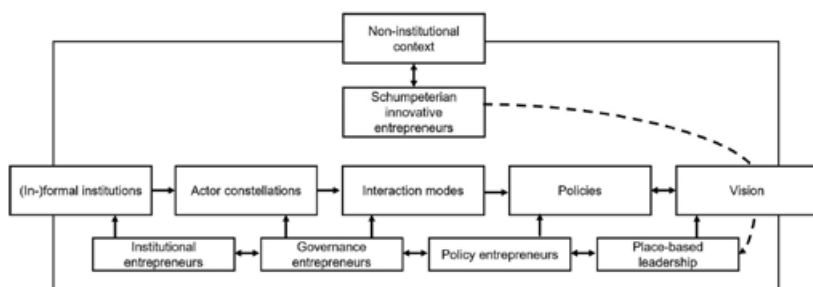
Source: Based on Döringer (2020b).

Figure 12.1   The role of entrepreneurial individuals in actor-centred institutionalism

Agents of change: implications for research in small and medium-sized towns

Research on agents of change in SMSTs offers multiple unexplored research agendas and directions. Research on agents of change implies asking who did what, when, where, why, how, with whom, and to what end, making the relatively smaller-scale context of SMSTs, with their easily identifiable agents of change, more suitable for effective qualitative research methodology than metropolitan areas (Grillitsch et al., 2021). Moreover, research in SMSTs facilitates the identification of critical junctures and key events as well as the actions directed towards achieving change, thus providing researchers with insights with more explanatory power (Grillitsch et al., 2021). SMSTs offer researchers a large variety of institutional contexts allowing for comparative approaches to identify mechanisms and factors that either enable or hinder change agency. There are two main research agendas that could be explored on agents of change in SMSTs. The first research agenda relates to link agents of change to the broader institutional context and the second relates to exploring the local processes linking agents of change together.

Linking agents of change with the broader institutional context

The first research agenda relates to connecting agents of change in SMSTs to their broader institutional contexts. This research agenda is closely linked to the agency–structure debate, which is especially relevant to the economic development of SMSTs due to their lower policy autonomy and opportunities for path creation. The agency–structure debate implies that agents of change

are embedded into an institutional context that determines the agents' behaviours and expectations (Battilana et al., 2009). As a result, the changes are mediated by pre-existing institutions embedded in a structure that is time- and space-specific (Moulaert et al., 2016). The opportunity space, within which the agents perceive change as possible at a certain time and space, offers an understanding of the interplay between agency and structure (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020). In linking agents of change with their institutional context, three promising research directions could be explored in the context of SMSTs compared to metropolitan areas: looking at comparative research on agents of change across institutional contexts, identifying the widening of opportunity space due to external shocks, and categorising traits, profiles, and strategic behaviours of agents of change across institutional contexts.

The first research direction provides robust comparative research on agents of change across institutional contexts. Indeed, SMSTs offer researchers a wide range of institutional contexts to study and compare through institutional theoretical frameworks such as the literature on Varieties of Capitalism (see Hall and Soskice, 2001). Comparative case study methodologies could shed light on the agency–structure debate, the interplay of agent and structure, and how institutions affect agents' strategic behaviours. The cases that could be selected are outlier SMSTs that manage to foster path creation in unlikely places, as with the case of Ledger – a frontier blockchain start-up that designs, produces, and commercialises hardware wallets for cryptocurrencies against all odds in Vierzon, France (Morisson and Mayer, 2021). This research is especially important for policymakers in recommending better place-based policies across institutional contexts (Barca et al., 2012).

The second research direction identifies how external shocks affect the opportunity space. Shocks can provide the impetus and justification for agents to act to foster changes or to form place-based leadership to respond to emerging place-based challenges (Morisson and Doussineau, 2019). Shocks affect the broader structure and thus can widen or constrain the opportunity space for agents of change. Due to their less diversified economic structures, SMSTs are more prone to economic shocks, such as industrial plant closures, making them the ideal space for relevant research. Comparative case study approaches could uncover the interplay between shocks, agents, and opportunity spaces, and how agents engage in and what processes lead to defensive 'reproductive agency' or proactive 'change agency' across institutional contexts (Bækkelund, 2021).

The third research direction proposes to categorise the traits, profiles, and strategic behaviours of agents of change across institutional contexts. Agents can

use a diverse range of strategic behaviours to affect changes, especially for the agents aiming for policy and institutional changes. In the context of SMSTs, cross-case analyses could uncover similar agents' traits across contexts. The behaviour of policy entrepreneurs is highly contextual – institutions, roles, and resources are highly relevant – making it interesting to explore in the context of SMSTs, which face constrained policy autonomy (Brouwer and Huitema, 2018). Moreover, the high degree of agency embeddedness and limited opportunity space could shed light on the agency–structure debate with elements related to socio-spatial culture and personality psychology across institutional contexts (Huggins and Thompson, 2019).

Linking agents of change together

The second research agenda relates to exploring the internal processes connecting agents of change together in SMSTs. It brings together different types of agency – institutional entrepreneurs, policy entrepreneurs, governance entrepreneurs, Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneurs, and place-based leadership – to understand their interactions and their impacts on SMSTs' socio-economic changes. In exploring internal dynamics among agents of change, three promising research directions could be explored in the context of SMSTs: determining the interactive and iterative processes among agents of change and subsequent governance arrangements in SMSTs, exploring the internal factors widening or constraining the opportunity space in SMSTs, and identifying the local and regional public policies that empower agents of change in SMSTs.

The first research direction pertains to the interactive and iterative processes among agents of change and the subsequent governance arrangements in SMSTs. Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020) point out how different types of agencies drive regional structural change. In-depth case studies could uncover the micro-level processes related to new industrial path development and the interplay among different types of agencies. What type of agents of change are most needed to initiate change, and when and how they are interrelated, could be interesting research questions. SMSTs offer fertile ground for such research, as agents of change and their relationships can easily be identified (see Gunko et al., 2021). Innovative methodological tools such as Situational Organizational Network Analysis could also be used to uncover the complex connections among agents of change leading to specific actions (see Glückler et al., 2020) and thus respond to the need in economic geography to adopt mixed-method approaches to build better methodology (Bathelt and Li, 2020). Moreover, it could shed light on the emergence of governance arrangements, which is a less rational procedure than the outcome of complex interac-

tions among individuals, networks, and behavioural patterns embedded in a multi-scalar process (Sotarauta, 2016).

The second research direction suggests an exploration of the internal factors that broaden or constrain the opportunity space for new industrial path development in SMSTs. The opportunity space (a specific time and place in which agents perceive that change is possible) is not fixed and varies according to internal and external factors. The opportunity space is formed and perceived by individual agents or groups of agents and mediates structure and agency. The concept of opportunity space, which is time-specific, region-specific, and agent-specific, could offer an interesting conceptual framework to investigate new industrial path development in SMSTs. Indeed, although agents of change, such as place-based leaders, institutional entrepreneurs, or policy entrepreneurs, can construct opportunity spaces for Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneurs, little is known on the internal factors leading to the construction of opportunity spaces in the first place, that is what makes agents of change perceive opportunities for new industrial path development in SMSTs and how can they seize windows of legitimacy to act (see Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020). SMSTs offer a space to explore those factors due to their diversity of contexts.

The third research direction proposes to identify the public policies to empower agents of change in SMSTs. In the European Union, the Smart Specialisation Strategy policy concept emphasises the importance of place-based leadership and inclusive co-creation with quadruple helix stakeholders to design and implement the strategy (Carayannis and Rakhmatullin, 2014). As a result, there is a need in policy circles to understand what place-based policies or governance arrangements can empower agents to act to foster local and regional change and development. Under the LEADER initiative in Spain, for instance, local action groups are not-for-profit structures that are formed by multiple local stakeholders – public institutions, private actors, universities, civil society – and are operating under a bottom-up approach to elaborate regional rural development plans. In addition, Smart Specialisation Strategy policy experiments made through the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process, a bottom-up approach to reveal what a region does best in terms of its science and technology endowments, can provide many policy insights on how to empower agents in a multiple set of contexts including SMSTs. Other European Commission initiatives, such as integrated territorial investments, which aim to reinforce place-based interventions in functional regions under a local governance, could also shed light on policies to empower agents of change in the context of SMSTs (European Commission, 2014).

Conclusions

In economic geography, SMSTs offer researchers fertile ground to understand the role of agents of change who act to promote local economic development and new industrial path development. The challenges faced in SMSTs, and their unique conditions, offer researchers a wide range of institutional contexts and make them the ideal space in which to study agents of change. Indeed, the smaller-scale relational context of SMSTs allows researchers to easily identify key events and agents of change and to describe with greater validity who did what, when, where, why, how, with whom, and to what consequence (Grillitsch et al., 2021). Two main research agendas and six research directions were laid out in this chapter. A third research agenda would be to explore in a transversal manner the two research agendas, namely the interplay linking together agents of change with their broader institutional contexts.

Suggestions for further reading

Brouwer, S. and Huitema, D. 2018. Policy entrepreneurs and strategies for change. *Regional Environmental Change.* **18**(5), 1259–1272.

The authors focus on the role of agents of change in policy dynamics. They provide a typology of entrepreneurial strategies available for policy entrepreneurs and the relevant contextual elements to promote policy changes. This paper offers the conceptual framework to empirically investigate policy changes in SMSTs.

Döringer, S. 2020b. Individual agency and socio-spatial change in regional development: Conceptualizing governance entrepreneurship. *Geography Compass.* **14**(5), 1–17.

The author provides a conceptual framework to investigate the role of agents of change, namely policy entrepreneurs, institutional entrepreneurs, and governance entrepreneurs, in local and regional development. Döringer highlights the importance of looking at the interplay and interactions among agents of change and the implications they have for local and regional governance. This paper gives the theoretical tools to explore idiosyncratic agency interplay in SMSTs.

Grillitsch, M. and Sotarauta, M. 2020. Trinity of change agency, regional development paths and opportunity spaces. *Progress in Human Geography.* **44**(4), 704–723.

The authors look at the trinity of change agency, namely Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneurs, institutional entrepreneurs, and place-based leadership, to enable new industrial path development. The authors introduce the concept of opportunity space that mediates the interplay between structure and agency, which can be constructed and exploited by the trinity of change agency. This paper provides the conceptual framework to investigate the trinity of change and opportunity space in the context of SMSTs.

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13 The road ahead: advancing our research agenda for small and medium-sized towns in a world of uneven development

Heike Mayer and Michela Lazzeroni

An invitation

We conclude this book with an invitation to you, the reader, to engage in further research about small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs). In the present chapter, we outline a road ahead for scholarly work in this field. We personally think that the points we present are worthwhile to be considered, but we also encourage you to revise them with your own ideas about future research. As a matter of fact, research on SMSTs has come a long way and we are convinced that SMSTs will stay in focus and that we can leverage the momentum that has been built up over the past years. We follow the call by Ocejo et al. (2020) "to step back from uncritical acceptance of large size as the arbiter of urbanity" (p. 3).

Robinson (2006) also insists on the need to put the "ordinary cities," where many people live and work, at the center of the academic debate and to extrapolate theorical insights from all types of cities and not only from global or creative ones. The research agendas presented in this book propose to consider SMSTs as ordinary cities and we ought to theorize from the insights we gain from the study of smaller urban places.

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The road ahead

Keep on going

We would like to start the road ahead by encouraging scholars to keep on going and to continue their research on SMSTs. This suggestion is not trivial because the lure to turn the attention to the exceptional cases such as global or world cities or the most innovative or economically successful cities is quite strong. Speaking from our own experience, we know that it is often difficult and challenging to defend one's research focus on SMSTs. Some colleagues or reviewers seem to get bored by such a focus as they would probably prefer to hear and read interesting, perhaps even exceptional, stories. Yet, if we can withstand the pressure to turn to the exceptional, and if we keep on going and continue to focus on SMSTs, we will be able to deepen and develop a more coherent set of theories. This way, we will be able to examine more systematically the experiences and the cases of smaller urban places.

Going beyond size

One of the most important insights this book offers is the notion that we need to go beyond population size when studying SMSTs. SMSTs are not merely the smaller version of large cities. In fact, depending on their context, position and networks, SMSTs can develop dynamics that are not expected given their size. As cities – both large and small – are more and more connected within their functional region, but also through national and international networks, the need to examine the benefits and drawbacks of their position within the urban system becomes obvious. Evert Meijers and Martijn Burger apply the concepts of "borrowed size" and "agglomeration shadow" to SMSTs (Chapter 3) and provide us with a framework that goes beyond size. A number of chapters in this book criticize the urban bias and implicit judgment of SMSTs of whether or not they fit frameworks developed in the context of large cities (see for example Chapter 9 by Koen Salemink). It is therefore necessary to analyze, once more, the dynamics of small and medium-sized cities not only in terms of opposition, dependence or marginality. This implies a relational approach and a multipolar and interdependent development perspective regarding large cities, which leads to the enhancement of distinctive local resources and new "alliances."

Towards an actor-oriented approach

In addition to positioning, this book points to the important role organizations, actors and institutions play in SMSTs. We need to recognize that their

quality and capabilities do matter beyond their mere presence, absence or simply their quantity. We challenge scholars to focus on the ways in which actors in SMSTs forge ahead and how they use their unique skills, capabilities and connections in doing so (as outlined by Arnault Morisson in Chapter 12). Also, a focus on a diverse range of policies and how policies are designed, implemented and what kind of impact they have will be important in such an actor-oriented approach (as David Kaufmann and Stefan Wittwer suggest in Chapter 11). There also needs to be a focus on why actors, organizations and institutions do not help and why they hinder the development of towns. Combining a perspective on positioning with an actor-oriented approach will allow us to explain the development trajectories of SMSTs. Their ability to adapt to changes and to promote socio-economic development are linked to individual actors, but especially to the system of interactions they manage to build and to their capacity to align different interests and agendas. In this direction, the small size can favor the construction of local networks, which can then function in a collective manner and contribute to the definition of a shared urban vision.

New forms of urbanity

Working on SMSTs allows us to uncover a diverse range of urban experiences and responses to challenges. A focus on SMSTs provides an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of diverse modes of urbanity. We will then be able to examine whether the processes that we observe in SMSTs are similar or different to those in large cities. Some developments might be surprisingly similar (e.g. when we think of economic dynamics), while others may deviate and be quite different (e.g. when it comes to identities). In the scientific literature, the provincialism of SMSTs is often emphasized as opposed to the socio-economic dynamism and cultural openness of large cities. In reality, as Garrett-Petts (2005) points out, the definition of the urban dimension is configured as experiential and influenced by the habitus, the sense of place, the attitude of a town to build local development paths and to live cityness practices (see also Chapter 2 by Annett Steinführer). Given our call to go beyond size, to incorporate the quality and capabilities of actors and institutions and to think about SMSTs as places where urbanity plays out differently, we point towards theories and concepts that incorporate variation from the beginning and thereby avoid superimposing existing ones.

More empirical and comparative work

The chapters in this book provide a framework for studying SMSTs. There is a need for more empirical work, particularly work that compares SMSTs. Such

comparisons would need to be systematic as they would need to hold certain aspects constant (e.g. context, type of actor, local projects, etc.). We encourage more work that is sensitive to the urban bias and takes SMSTs at face value. We also think that it would be important to conduct empirical work in an inductive and deductive manner. Approaching SMSTs without pre-defined theoretical frameworks allows researchers a more impartial assessment. While theories are important, we always need to be aware of their origins and the embedded assumptions. Theories can help with interpretation, but they may be biased towards larger cities (as Heike Mayer in Chapter 6 shows for innovation and entrepreneurship). From the methodological point of view, empirical research will have to incorporate quantitative analyses on the evolution of SMSTs and their integration with other centers of urban networks, with more qualitative investigations aimed at reconstructing specific paths and identifying the characterizing factors. This means giving space to direct observations, interviews with local actors and stakeholders, analyses of the implemented policies and narrative components built around current and future projects.

Open questions

What is missing in this book? Are there topics that have not been addressed by the authors, but that need to be taken up by future research? Perhaps it is worth mentioning that we have not addressed questions related to uneven development and the role of SMSTs in fostering cohesive territorial development. As concerns are growing about uneven territorial development and the rise of "places that don't matter" (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), we encourage further research to answer critical questions about the role of SMSTs in stabilizing or destabilizing socio-economic development. For instance, to what extent can SMSTs play a role as anchors and central places in wider regions that are subject to industrial decline and structural change? Or, alternatively, do SMSTs drain their hinterlands of economic opportunities? Furthermore, in what ways are regional inequalities affected by developments in nearby SMSTs? How are SMSTs emerging from crisis situations such as the global COVID-19 pandemic and are they able to capture positive dynamics such as digitalization and reindustrialization (as suggested by David Bole in Chapter 7)? As many national policies ascribe central place functions to SMSTs (as also illustrated in Chapter 4 by Christophe Demazière), the relevance of these kinds of questions is growing.

In addition, we have not addressed questions related to the role of identity and culture in shaping local projects and development trajectories of small towns. The urban dimension of small urban centers can guarantee the possibility of preserving their identity and characteristics – despite the presence

of fewer functions and services – and at the same time foster the emergence of bottom-up projects through the involvement of local communities (as also underlined in Chapter 5 by Michela Lazzeroni). Moreover, the revitalization of small towns and villages represents in some countries, such as Italy and Switzerland, one of the axes of post-pandemic recovery processes related to new ways of living and to spending free time. From this perspective, what actions can be designed to enhance the local identity and culture without risking closure or resistance to change and innovation? How is it possible to activate tourism development without the risk of overtourism or the commodification of some spaces intended for traditional uses and activities (thereby continuing the work developed in this book by Chiara Rabbiosi and Dimitri Ioannides in Chapter 8)? What policies can be implemented to strengthen existing local communities and integrate new residents, avoiding operation with a dominant real-estate logic? What role can technologies play in all this?

Also, given the increasing importance of grand societal challenges such as climate change, biodiversity, energy self-sufficiency, etc., we have probably not adequately addressed questions related to the ways in which SMSTs are adapting to such challenges. Are these smaller urban places nimbler, as Timothy Beatley suggests in Chapter 10, when it comes to implementing innovative and experimental measures that help address challenges related to climate adaptation, biodiversity protection, etc.? Does community cohesion help them be more flexible in addressing the challenges? Considering the ways in which policy makers and other types of actors in SMSTs address challenges gives us manifold opportunities for future research.

Lastly, our focus in this book was mostly oriented towards the industrialized world in the Global North and less on the role and function and relevant questions regarding SMSTs in the Global South. There are numerous open research questions related to the development of SMSTs in the global periphery. Given that in many countries of the Global South urban development patterns were oriented towards only a few cities, SMSTs were often overlooked and less understood.

Taking turns

We hope that this book offers interesting insights into the ways in which we can develop future research on SMSTs. As editors, we learned a lot and are inspired by the chapters presented in this book. We would like to thank the authors for contributing their insights to this agenda and for traveling along

with us on a journey to explore smaller urban places. As a reader, you may be an established scholar, an emerging researcher, a graduate student or a policy maker with an interest in SMSTs. We encourage you to continue the road ahead and to help us build novel empirical approaches, theories and concepts, but also policy practices that are suitable for the manifold realities of SMSTs.

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