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THE ROLE OF SMALL AND MEDIUM SIZED TOWNS IN EASTERN AFRICA MOUNTAINS: NEW OPPORTUNITIES OR CHALLENGED POSITION?

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Abstract

The small and medium towns have for long been playing an essential role as intermediary between rural economies and populations and urban territories. Local changes as well as national and global evolutions are modifying those classical linkages through new scales of integration and the emergence of new actors. In this context, the intermediary position played by secondary towns (as market towns, districts and services poles) is changing, between strengthening and bypassing effects.

Key words: small and medium sized towns, intermediate towns, mountains, Eastern Africa

Introduction

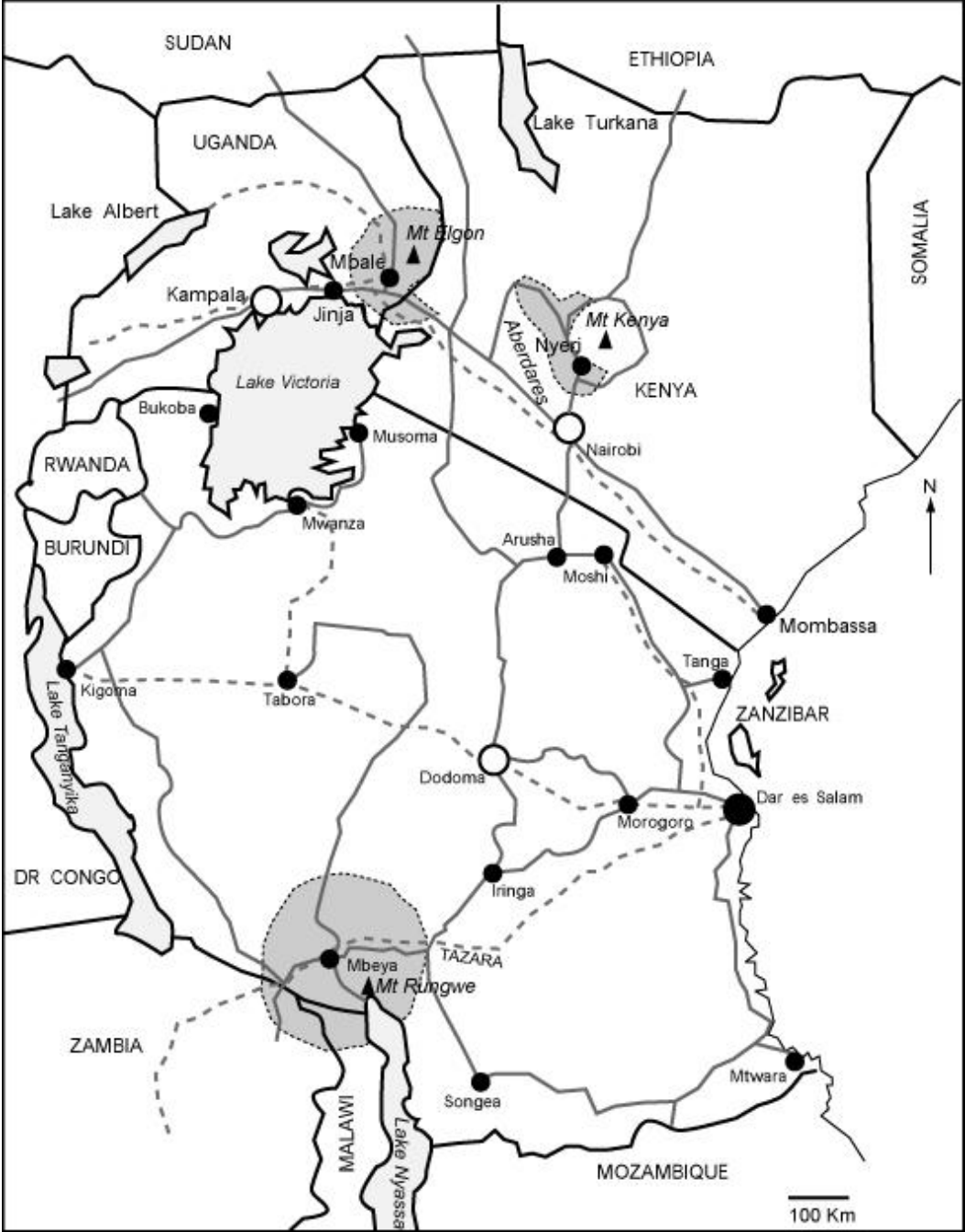
In the context of Eastern African mountains, relationships with cities are an important element as spatial mobility, exchanges and linkages between rural and urban spaces are strong. The place taken by small and medium sized towns is particularly interesting. They are play an old and renewed role as intermediate, as outpost between rural and urban economies, acting as relays in territories interactions and assuming functions of poles of centrality, even at a second level. They take part in the setting of migration flows and are places of diffusion of development through their public equipments, services and shops or enterprises. However, they are not always supported by national policies — which are often dedicated to major centers — and can suffer from globalization leading to the concentration of qualified people and activities in the upper levels of the urban hierarchy, more integrated in global networks. Local changes but also global and national strategies have modified classical ways of integration, articulating scales (local, national or international) and showing new actors. Our hypothesis is that the intermediate function played by small and medium sized towns is changing, between strengthening opportunities and weakening logics. The main issue is therefore their capacity to keep on structuring heterogeneous places and to link more numerous actors. The multiplication of development actors, mainly private, at different scales, who articulate or overlap their spatial practices with official and administrative limits, reinforces the territory complexity but also innovation processes based on relationships — urban-rural linkages or within the urban hierarch.

Fieldworks for the research program “Mountains and Medium-Sized Towns¹” in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania give elements of analysis. Surveys have been conducted with local private and public actors of development (municipal services, head of associations,

¹ CORUS Program 6165 « Mountains and Medium Towns in East Africa. Environmental management, Flows of people and Resources », 2008-2011, with French Ministry of Foreign Affairs support.

cooperatives and small and medium-sized enterprises), associated with meetings with shopkeepers and street vendors, on issues of networks and linkages². The analysis is based on the case of medium towns (Mbale, Mbeya and Nyeri) associated with small towns (respectively Kapchorwa, Tukuyu and Karatina).

Document 1 – Location of studied areas



- Capital city
- Major city
- Main secondary cities
- ▨ Studied towns influence zones
- ▲ Studied Mountains
- Main railways
- Main roads

² Fieldwork conducted in December 2008, July 2009 and July 2011.

Mbale is located at the foot of Mount Elgon, “fruit and vegetable basket” for Uganda, next to the Kenya border. With 80.000 inhabitants it is the main urban centre of this rural area (doc. 1). Mbeya (in Tanzania) is located 700 kilometers South-West of Dar es Salam, in the Uporoto Montains and next to Mount Rungwe, on the TAZARA line, next to Zambia and Malawi borders. It has around 300.000 inhabitants. The third case study is in Central Kenya Province, with Nyeri (100.000 inhabitants) as medium town and Karatina (7.000 inhab.) as small town examples. They are located between Mount Kenya and the Aberdares range. Regional contexts are quite similar with dynamic and changing mountain environments (evolution in farming and rural economies) and with high population density rural areas. Linkages between highland hinterlands and secondary towns are intense and diversified. Mbale and Mbeya are in border and off-centered situations, whereas Nyeri is more central and closer to the capital city of Nairobi (130 Km).

The examples of the above towns give information for the changing role of small and medium sized towns in their intermediate functions, in contexts of rapid evolution. They show the innovative capacities of actors and issues of new territorialities at stake through the growing role of middlemen and the process of integration in wider networks.

1. The traditional role of small and medium sized towns in the urban-rural interface

The importance of small and medium sized towns in rural-urban relationships has for long been analyzed in the African context and East African Mountains are particularly interesting for the understanding of those linkages.

1.1 Abundant literature and an opportune context

French-speaking as well and English-speaking researchers have been interested in the role of secondary towns in the extraversion of rural economies (Rondinelli, 1988; Simon, 1992; Owuor, 2007). The development of linkages between secondary towns and rural areas is crucial for economic development, farm productions and commercial linkages (Chaléard, 1996). The literature stresses this point in West Africa, where secondary towns are important at the regional level, interacting with rural hinterlands as markets and redistribution points, creating demand and stimulating local products (Giraud, 1994). An urban-rural continuum is characteristic of this urbanization. Lots of regional or weekly markets are important commercial nodes for productions. They are places for the trade of farm and cattle products but also relay places between rural and urban zones.

The role of those towns is not only dedicated to market. They are administration places and areas of social and economic interactions for rural people. They play an important role as rural mobility catchments, in the opening of the mountains to urbanity through the diffusion of modernity and offer of services. The different denominations used show the diversity and complementary nature of their functions. If some authors insist on the size and then on the position in the urban hierarchy (*small* or *medium towns*), others valorize functions (*market towns*, *district towns*, *sub-centers*). Often, the stress is put on interactions and articulations played by those *intermediate*, *median*, *transition* towns through their support, distribution or network functions, changing according to the scale of analysis.

Those secondary towns are described as the symbol of intermediate towns, as transition between major cities and other towns and rural areas, and vice versa, from the bottom to the top. They have an intermediation role in a hierarchical structure, between an urban centre and

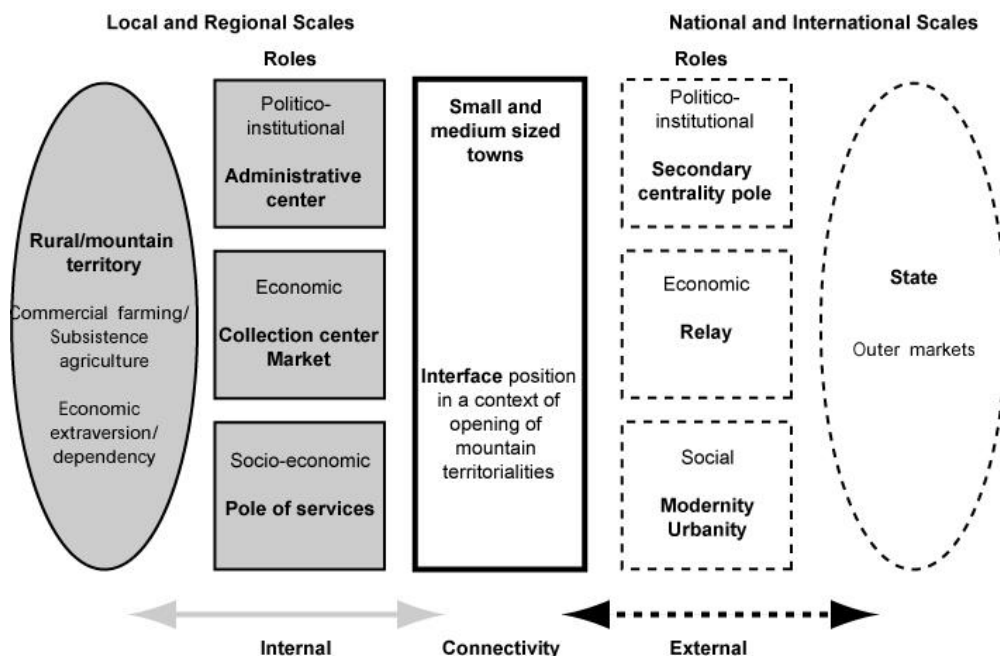
its regional hinterland as center of economic, social, cultural and historical services. The intermediate town is located between two extremities (the small and the big, the near and the far) and develops intermediation functions between spaces at different scales (local, regional, national, international). They are at the junction of flows of information, ideas, people, goods and services, a transition place between adjacent areas and global zones. What is important is their capacity to be integrated in global networks (Carrière, 2008).

East African mountains are interesting places for the analysis of urban-rural linkages. They form fertile areas, with ancient flows of people attracted by exceptional environmental conditions (on the Mount Elgon, rural districts of Manafwa and Bududa have between 800 to 1.000 inhab./Km²). They are the core of East African agricultural production, drivers of past colonial and current national economies. These mountains are ‘open’ mountains, included in systems of exchange that integrate multi-scalar geographic dimensions: highland and lowland systems, humid and arid systems, rural-urban mobility, etc. (Bart, 2003). Towns are linked with those mountains, with lots of markets, small localities or medium towns with old commercial and transport functions (Charlery *et al.*, 2009). Relationships between highlands and lowlands, between rural and urban places are structuring those « bastions of rurality » and secondary towns are playing their role of intermediation.

1.2 The role of secondary growth pole at national and international scales

At national and international scales, intermediate towns are important in three main ways. They play an important role in rural and regional people settlement, assume their part in territory administration and are privileged places for diffusion of social modernity (doc. 2).

Document 2 – Small and medium sized towns: an interface role in the rural-urban linkages in East-African Mountains



Their dedicated missions in national planning are often linked with their place in rural-urban relationships as they have strong linkages with their hinterlands (Tacoli, 1998). Their place as services and commercial centers has for long been seen as crucial for the development of rural zones (to answer needs of inhabitants and producers). More recently, small towns are considered to play an important role in the linkages of their hinterlands with national and global markets but also in the provision of non-farm activities for rural population, therefore widening the local economic basis. They also supply services and equipments for their regional hinterlands. The term “secondary”, often employed, underlines the dependency towards decision centers located in bigger towns or abroad. Local and regional subdivisions of administration or branches of economic and social services are numerous in medium towns, when headquarters are located in more important cities. Moreover, they are seen as centers from which innovation and modernization processes can spread in rural zones.

The case studies show this secondary position (important regional centers) in structured urban networks, in off-centered even isolated situation (in the case of Mbeya) from national capitals. But their polarization on regional urban network (on small towns) and rural areas is comforting them as intermediate poles.

1.3 Classical functions of district center and pole of services at local and regional scales

On the political and administrative sides, those towns are often district centers (their status depending on the administrative organization of the countries), with lots of civil servants and private actors. Thus, they are well equipped and have developed service industries such as a variety of goods and services equipments and infrastructures, good connections, important school system, health services and finance activities.

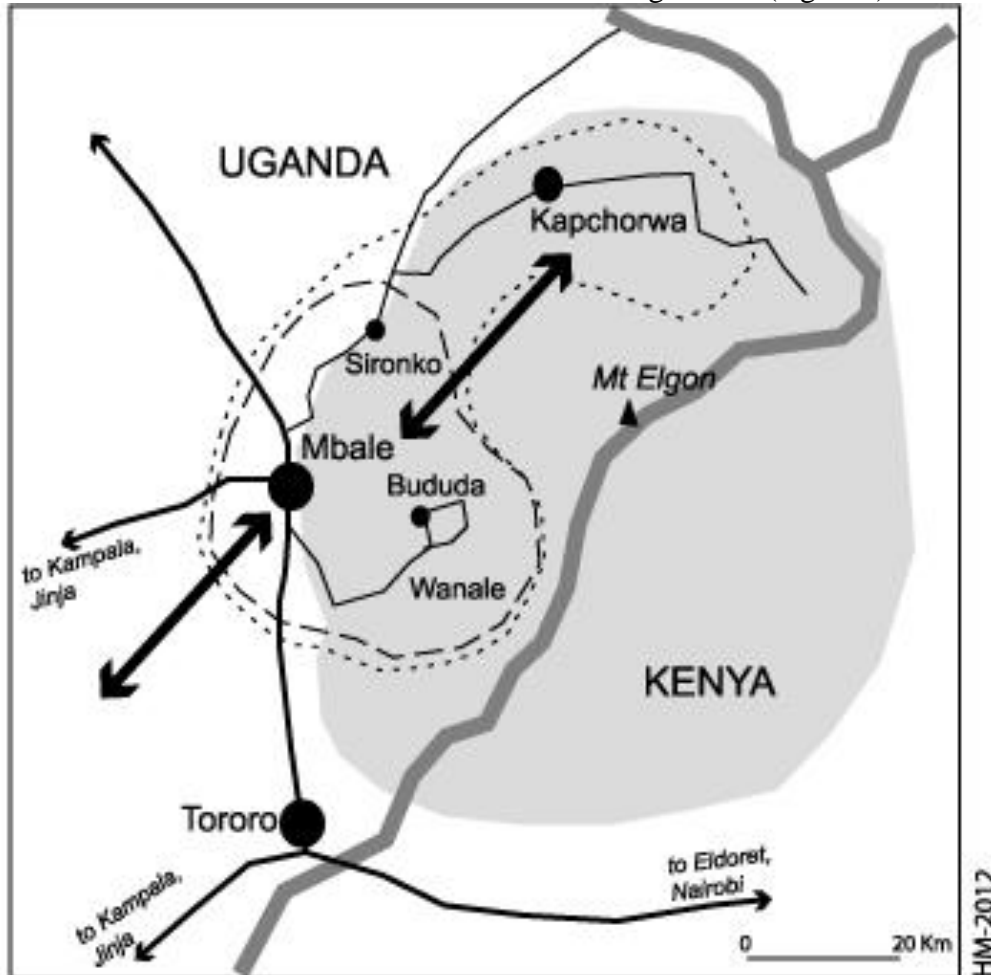
From an economic point of view, small towns are often collecting centers for farm products and places of important weekly markets. Daily, it is an important supply place of manufactured goods for urban and rural inhabitants. The redistribution function of agricultural goods is obvious in those towns through the omnipresence of shops selling products like fruits, vegetables or dairy. One of the most important places is the central market (and all its surrounding shops and stalls) but products can be found all over the town.

In Mbale, vegetable retailers are supplied three times a week from mountain areas (in Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, carrots, cabbages, onions, bananas, etc.). Middlemen are important in this trade: they go to rural zones to buy products and bring them back to urban retailers (doc. 3). It is easy to find products from all around Mount Elgon, from Kapchorwa in the North or Bududa in the South. An important part of the mountain production is also sold in other urban centers (Jinja, Kampala) and redistributed all over the country, through urban actors. The same occurs in Central Kenya with a market function even more important in Karatina (small town) than in Nyeri (medium town) due to a better location on the main road: Karatina market is famous for being very busy due to various productions from the mountains around (Mount Kenya and Aberdares slopes) and the proximity to Nairobi urban demand.




Medium towns are also gateways to rural areas. They are nodes of redistribution for productions, often manufactured, “imported” (in the sense that they come from outside the area, either from other regions or from abroad). In Mbale, lots of products are coming from Kampala and other cities or from Kenya. It is like the outpost from where products are redistributed (doc. 3). In the case of Mbeya, due to the border location and with the important

railway and road lines, linkages are strong with all the sub-region (doc. 4). Mbeya is the concentration point for goods coming from a large area (fishes from the Great Lakes). It acts also as Malawi dry port (reloading function).

Document 3 – Mbale influence zone in the Mount Elgon area (Uganda)



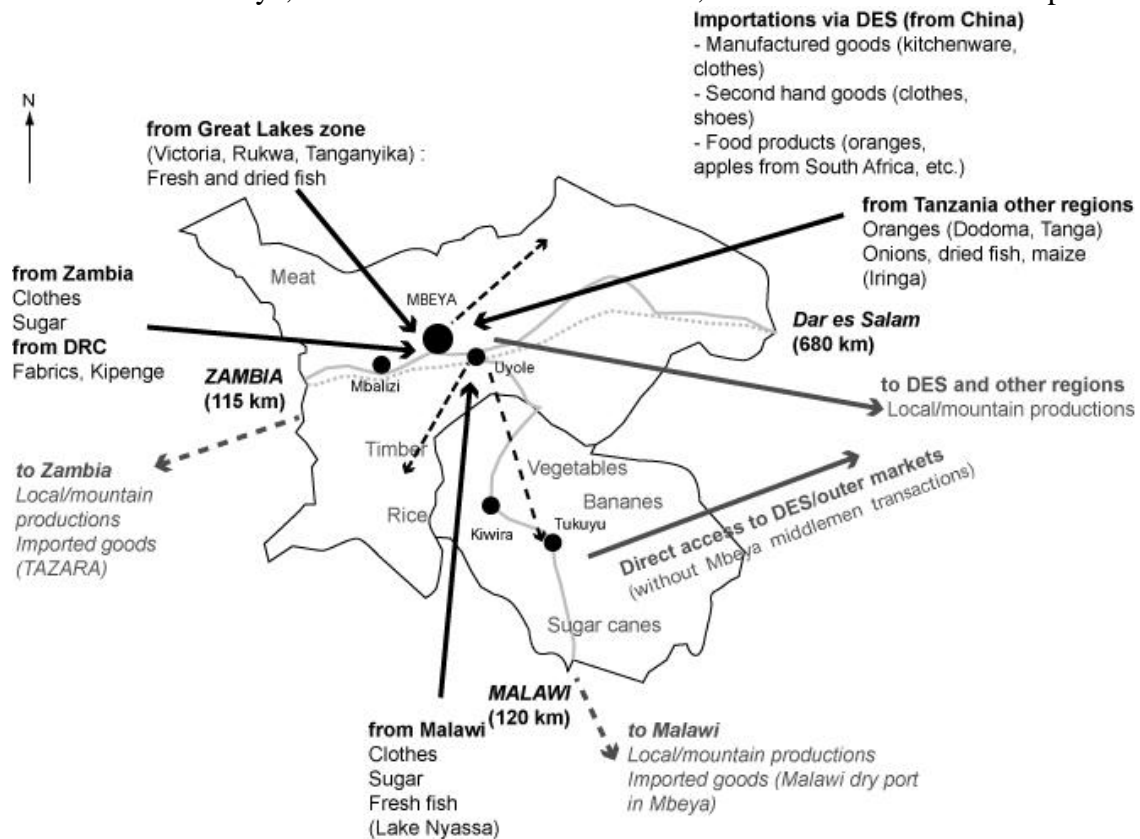
Mount Elgon Zone

-  Mountain
-  International border
-  Main roads

Urban hierarchy and Mbale influence

-  Medium town
-  Small towns
-  Market towns
-  Direct influence
-  Secondary influence
-  Flows of people and goods

Document 4 - Mbeya, a redistribution center for local, national and international products



Mbeya, a multiscale redistribution center :

- TAZARA (railways DES/Zambia)
- Main roads
- Main places / markets
- Mbeya and Tukuyu Districts' limits
- "Imported" goods (regional, national, international scales)
- Local redistribution of "imported" goods through Mbeya and Uyole markets
- Timber Local/mountain productions
- Exportation of local/mountain productions
- - - Border and international redistribution of "imported" goods and local/mountain productions

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Through intermediate towns, mountain areas are integrated to international markets. For example, farm inputs such as seeds or chemical products are widely used (and even more due to the evolution of farming practices). Fieldwork conducted in Mbale show that retailers get their supplies for cattle (food or medicines) from Kampala or Kenya (doc. 3). The influence zone of these specialized shops covers the whole Mbale district and surrounding areas (within a radius of 40 to 50 Km). Mbale itself has outposts in small towns like Kapchorwa, Budadiri and Bududa, closer to rural places. They are often more specialized. This system is similar in Tanzania, with Tukuyu acting as a relay for Mbeya influence. The place of Mbeya and Mbale in those commercial farming networks gives evidence of their centrality within mountain systems. The location in border zones is reinforcing this situation. There are mediator and intermediate in rural-urban linkages.

Finally, the classical intermediation function of secondary towns is linked to the central criteria of connectivity (Nadou, 2010). It is at the same time external (opening to state and outer markets, networks issues) with strategic functions, and internal (towards surrounding areas) with essential daily functions (services center, influence on hinterland, proximity issues). This old capacity of intermediate towns as catchment and distribution centers is a way to link rural economies to national and international economies (doc. 2). If this role is still active, it is submitted to important stakes linked with changes in agriculture (post-coffee economies, market gardening development) but also with impacts of broader politico-economic transformation.

2. Changes in the intermediation function of small and medium sized towns

For two or three decades, the growth of medium towns has been taking place in changing rural dynamics, linked to local processes as well as impacts of more global evolutions.

2.1 The importance of new local initiatives

The opening of new markets, liberalization of economies and emergence of new actors are accelerating changes in long term established linkages. The involvement of producers in new productions and distribution networks (mainly market gardening) is redefining composite and unequal productive relationships, where land issues, access to water and environmental resources, availability of new communication tools become a relative advantage. Highlands specialized in traditional commercial crops suffer from historical rigidity (land tenure and management issues). It is still uncertain if farmers have the capacity to invest in those new production sectors, to redefine their relations with markets and national (and even) international economies, to defend their products, with new forms of organizations and a better professionalization. Agricultural changes, new farm practices and social changes are closely linked. Coffee production is declining (with some differences depending on areas) either in estates and commercial productions or in village plots, often in combination with bananas as in the Mount Elgon area (Nakileza, 2007). New productions benefitting from highland environmental resources are developing fast: market gardening for urban demand but also dairy products. Cabbages, onions, potatoes, tomatoes, carrots... are exchanged daily and supply new markets from where middlemen or traders will transport them to urban centers (photo 1).

Those agricultural changes have powerful impacts on land structures and social organization forms. With a strong demographic growth and investments of urban businessmen in farm production, the pressure on land is important. The development of market gardening shows that farmers are reactive to changes. But a complex and unequal social process is taking place, in a still fragile context where individual initiatives are important and collective organizations not always strong. Besides market gardening development, pluriactivity is increasing within households holding multiple jobs or incomes in non farming activities often related to the production (transformation, selling and services). "Mountain territories are nowadays invested by forces and issues which challenge the notion of rurality and question their long-term acquired and assumed fertility, basis of their specificity³" (Charlery *et al.*, 2009).

³ Author's translation : « Les territoires de montagne sont aujourd'hui investis par des forces, des enjeux dont les déterminants marginalisent la notion même de ruralité et remettent en cause leur fertilité acquise et entretenue, autour de laquelle s'était construite leur spécificité ».

Photo 1- Retail trade of market gardening products in Karatina market, Kenya (Mainet, 2009)



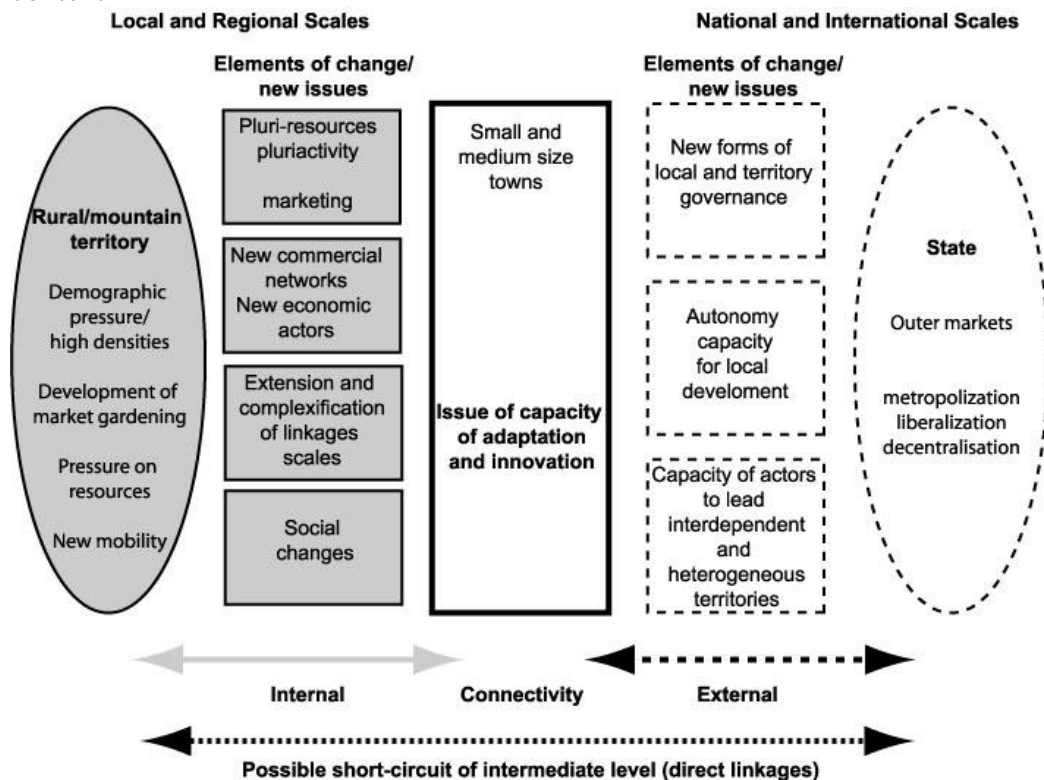
These productive changes are associated with new forms of mobility and migration (circular, temporary, commuting). Small and medium sized towns are therefore centers for all sorts of mobility, from and to rural zones. Transport networks have been developing in and around intermediate towns for daily or weekly travels of people or transportation of products (*boda-boda* for short-distance and lowlands areas, *tatas*, *matatus* and taxis for highlands connections). Private actors, local and national, have invested in this opportunity area and are playing a crucial role in the integration of these economies to broader markets.

New scales of relationship are at stake. Flows from highlands to lowlands give evidence of new territory frame and resources uses. Pluri-resources and pluriactivity are redefining trajectories and households strategies (Charlery *et al.*, 2009). In this context, urban middlemen, mainly wholesalers and traders whose role is often criticized but important in the development of networks, but also farmers and producers who transport their own production (often combined with others) directly to markets, show their capacity of economic and social innovation. Farmers are weaving ties between multiple territories, between rural and urban areas and are promoting multi-scalar social and economic linkages.

2.2 Stakes associated with global changes

In addition to the transformation of mountain economies and new derived linkages, the role of intermediation of secondary towns is also affected by the impact of more general changes (doc. 5).

Document 5 – Small and medium sized towns: new intermediation functions in changing context



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A positive aspect is often dedicated to this level of the urban hierarchy in the academic literature. Small and medium sized towns seem to be at a level where transformations are visible, measurable and the implementation of “good governance” more feasible than at other scales (Owuor, 2007; Bertrand 1993; Pourtier, 1991).

The economic crisis which leads to a rapid decline of incomes in most of African countries seems to have reinforced the role of secondary towns. Households’ incomes must be diversified and households’ and families’ strategies strengthened. Return migrations seem to be important in time of crisis and “exurbanization” phenomenon has been analyzed, describing migrations from main urban centers to secondary ones (Bruneau, 2002). In these towns, due to the proximity with rural economies and opportunities, to lower prices and rents than in bigger towns, economic crisis impacts seem less difficult to overcome.

With the intensification of economic liberalization in countries like Uganda and Tanzania, an increasing number of actors are involved in rural-urban linkages and traditional references are blurred. Small and medium sized towns provide important public and private services and infrastructures for the development of farming and non farming enterprises. Lots of rural activities are located in small towns, dealing with transport, building, wholesale and retail trade, financial and credit services and supplying urban as well as rural population (Rondinelli, 1988). These activities are good indicators of the urban influence of these centers. Karatina illustrates the important amount of businesses involved in trade (more than 77 % of all the registered business permits in 2011), but also the diversification of activities with transport companies and services (professional and technical).

Document 6- Registered business permits in Karatina (Kenya)

Type of business and activity (selection)	Number	Percentage
Trade	2807	77.93
among which		
Large trader, shop, retail store	136	3.78
Medium trader, shop or retail service	593	16.46
Small trader, shop or retail service (up to 5 pers.)	850	23.60
Hawker with motor vehicle	5	0.14
Hawker without motor vehicle	884	24.54
Other wholesale-retail trader	41	1.14
Small informal sector trader/service	20	0.56
Semi-permanent informal sector trader	227	6.30
Catering/accommodation	271	7.52
Transport and storage	153	4.25
among which		
Medium transport company (from 6 to 30 vehicles)	7	0.19
Small transport company (from 2 to 5 vehicles)	19	0.53
Independent transport operator (1 vehicle)	37	1.03
Professional and technical services	150	4.16
among which		
Small professional services firm (up to 2 pers.)	12	0.33
Independent technical operator	32	0.89
Large financial services (over 25 pers.)	8	0.22
Medium financial services (from 6 to 25 pers.)	8	0.22
Small financial services (up to 5 pers.)	4	0.11
Manufacturer, workshop, factory	147	4.08
among which		
Medium industrial plant (from 6 to 75 empl.)	1	0.03
Small industrial plant (sup to 15 empl.)	1	0.03
Medium workshop/service repair	4	0.11
Small workshop/service repair	121	3.36
Education, health and entertainment	58	1.61
Agriculture	18	0.50
Total	3 602	100.00

Source: Karatina Municipal Council (2011)

With the development of liberalization, old cooperatives like the *Tanganyika Farmers Association* in Tanzania (with a regional branch in Mbeya) are competed by new and often small private structures, giving better prices and conditions to members and better payment opportunities. The increasing demand for agro-inputs (fertilizers and chemicals, seeds and animal feed) is supplied by more and more private actors, visible all around small and medium sized towns streets (photo 2).

Photo 2 – Example of new retail shops for farmers (inputs) in Mbale, Uganda (Mainet, 2008)



New issues are also important in the financial domain. Microcredit boards like SACCOs (*Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies*) or farmers associations are active. It is a quite recent phenomenon: most of the offices have been opened for less than ten years. In the Mbale region, the *Uganda Microfinance limited* is an interesting example. It is a branch of the Equity Bank of Uganda. The main office is in Tororo (a medium town South of Mbale) but the operational office is in Mbale, in charge of the Mount Elgon region with Sironko, Kapchorwa and Manafwa areas (doc. 3). The bank provides loans for groups of farmers (with 10 to 20 members) for short-term periods (from 3 to 12 months). Analyzing those organizations (associations, cooperatives or financial institutions) show the importance of the urban network for the most structured ones: regional branches are located in medium towns (Mbale, Mbeya or Nyeri), local offices in small towns (Kapchorwa, Tukuyu or Karatina) and rural antens in market towns (Bududa, Wanale) with representatives for more isolated rural areas.

Those evolutions question the capacity of cooperation between actors and the effects on local development. A priori, they tend to reinforce the role of secondary towns by diversifying their services and by giving better prices and opportunities for farmers. But long-term impacts should still be measured, specifically the leading capacity of the smallest enterprises, often not well structured and which viability is not confirmed in case of economic crisis. Another impact is short-circuiting of intermediate levels with direct access to rural areas by actors from main cities. It is very visible in the transport area with direct supply in rural areas and with the impact of new communication technologies (doc. 4). Farmers have now better and direct access to urban demand, can be informed of urban prices with direct cell phone calls, and don't need secondary towns' middlemen as much as before.

On the political side, decentralization processes have been affecting most of the countries since the 1990's, giving new opportunities for regional centers. Yet these reforms are not always strengthening their position with the creation of new rural districts (such as Bududa and Manafwa districts in the Mbale region) which used to be dependent on Mbale district. The issue is dealing with the capacity of the new authorities to cope with needs in terms of equipments and infrastructures with low financial resources. Few real cooperation policies are

implemented between urban and rural districts and interterritoriality development is lacking whereas linkages are strong.

Another question is dealing with the lack of industrial activities in those secondary centers. Most of the manufactured goods are produced elsewhere and are imported from other regions or from abroad (doc. 4). Local resources (like timber or farm products) are often transformed outside the area. The example of Karatina is quite representative with around 4 % of business involved in industrial or workshop activities (doc. 6). Intermediate towns are more transit places than productive ones. There is a real stake of developing industrial activities in secondary towns. This would reinforce the role of this level of the urban hierarchy in its assumed role of regional management.

Conclusion

The importance of rural-urban linkages for those economies and regions — with high density and intense mobility — is widely visible and intermediate towns are playing a key role in those interactions through their functions of market, services and relays to innovation. The current context questions the traditional intermediation function of this level of the urban hierarchy. New urban governance strategies should take into account the rural side of urban development, with all the connections, coordination and interrelationships between spaces and actors. Secondary towns are active in the catchment of farm products and for the supply of rural areas but they are lacking real and effective tools for local development. The issue is the capacity of local as well as national actors to get involved in the implementation of interspaces cooperation. In that sense, they represent a good observatory of political and territory policies impacts and effects.

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