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

Christophe Demazière

Introduction

In many countries, small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs) find themselves in a field of tension concerning their overall spatial development, as metropolitanisation, 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 Perucca, 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

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 (<i>Association des petites villes de France</i>))	Municipalities – centres of 20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants and areas of intermunicipal cooperation (Towns of France (<i>Villes de France</i>))
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 (<i>Programme Petites villes de demain</i>), 2020–2026)	Functional urban areas of 30,000 to 200,000 inhabitants (Medium-Sized Towns Project (<i>Programme villes moyennes</i>), 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 <i>métropoles</i> (Commissariat 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 characterised 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 'metropole', '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 (ÓIR, 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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