

Navarre, Françoise; Delpiou, Aurelien

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Analyzing Small and Medium-Sized towns in the light of their constraints and opportunities - the case of Nevers (Burgundy - France)

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Aurélien DELPIROU, lecturer, Paris Institute of Urban Planning, Lab'Urba, Paris East University
Françoise NAVARRE, lecturer, Paris Institute of Urban Planning, Lab'Urba, Paris East University

**ANALYZING SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED TOWNS IN THE LIGHT OF THEIR
CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES
THE CASE OF NEVERS (BURGUNDY – FRANCE)**

“Small and medium-sized towns in Europe: the performance, role and challenges of public policy” Panel

INTRODUCTION

While small and medium-sized towns are profoundly rooted in the national territorial narrative (Delpirou, 2014), they currently occupy a marginal place both in academic research and public policy in France. And yet these “intermediate” spaces (Larmagnac, George-Marcepoil, Aubert, 2012) or spaces of “intermediation” (De Roo, 2005) have specific characteristics that set them apart from the territories that polarize the current prevailing rhetoric, first and foremost metropolitan spaces.

Our hypothesis is that the marginal position of medium-sized towns in action and analysis frameworks is in part linked to the difficulty these communities have in formulating their own strategies and policies. On the one hand, public action relating to territorial development in medium-sized towns often draws inspiration from that implemented in metropolitan areas: typical objectives include establishing themselves as poles of attraction, and thus participate in major trade flows. On the other hand, these towns are still largely dependent on the historic relationships with their rural hinterlands and surrounding small towns, particularly in terms of the range of services they provide: the aim here is to make the best possible use of these relationships and to preserve the existing territorial cohesion. Consequently, while the territories around medium-sized towns are faced with diverse, even opposing, dynamics, municipal leaders are struggling to develop coherent visions that reconcile economic efficiency with socio-spatial equity.

These hesitations are all the more pressing in view of the recent economic ups and downs, which have revealed the vulnerabilities of intermediate spaces (Davezies, 2012). The weakening of their drivers of development and the emergence of political and social tensions have forced

medium-sized towns to redefine not just their role within economic systems, but also their modes of governance.

In this contribution, we propose to analyse the ways in which these different tensions and hesitations manifest themselves in a specific context, namely that of the urban area of Nevers (60,000 inhabitants) in the west of Burgundy. After outlining the scientific and political reference frameworks that guide our work, we shall seek to present the emblematic and unique vulnerabilities of the Nevers area.¹ Finally, we shall show how these vulnerabilities are reflected in the constraints and dilemmas that hamper the formalization and implementation of local public action.

I/ TOWNS IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE THAT LACK SCIENTIFIC AND POLITICAL EXPERTISE?

1) “Medium-sized towns”: an ambiguous category

In 1997, the geographer Roger Brunet described the medium-sized town as an “unidentified real object” (1997, p. 188), underlining the considerable diversity of criteria used to define this category, depending on the country and period in question. Indeed, while most authors use demographic data to differentiate medium-sized towns from “large” and “small” towns, there exist almost as many thresholds as there are researchers or bodies responsible for collecting and processing such data (Demazière, 2014).

In France, the term *villes moyennes* (medium-sized towns) was first used for *communes* (municipalities) with populations of between 20,000 and 100,000, then for *unités urbaines* (urban areas)² within the same population bracket, as municipal boundaries have changed very little over time, with the result that built-up areas in France typically spread far beyond the core municipality into surrounding *communes*. These thresholds are still used by the FMVM (Fédération des maires des villes moyennes – Federation of Mayors of Medium-Sized Towns),³ an association of local politicians who exercise discreet but effective lobbying to promote and

¹ Field studies were carried out in Nevers over a two-year period as part of a consultancy project conducted by the Lab’Urba research unit in conjunction with Nevers municipal council.

² An *unité urbaine* is defined in terms of (i) the continuous built-up area around a settlement (with breaks of no more than 200 metres between two buildings, excluding public facilities and industrial/business areas), and (ii) the number of inhabitants in the built-up area (at least 2,000).

³ In 2011, the FMVM became the FVM (Fédération des villes moyennes – Federation of Medium-Sized Towns), before adopting the name Villes de France in June 2014.

draw attention to these towns. For its part, DATAR⁴ now prefers to use a definition based on metropolitan areas⁵ with populations of between 30,000 and 200,000, as it is of the opinion that there exist significant functional interdependencies between medium-sized urban areas and the periurban or rural spaces that surround them (De Roo, 2005).

The heterogeneous nature of this category is due to the variety of possible scales for observation and the diverse range of representations attached to these scales: a town of 20,000 inhabitants in Norway or Portugal may have functions normally found in towns of at least 100,000 inhabitants in Germany or France (Carrière, 2008). Conversely, medium-sized towns of the same size (100,000 inhabitants) but located on the edge of a large metropolitan area often serve as intermediate centres or satellite towns.

From this point of view, the French case has a number of unique features: in a context marked by the primacy of the capital, the relatively small size of France's other large cities, and the low population densities found in rural areas, medium-sized towns play a major role in the urbanization and structuring of the national territory. As a result, these towns have long enjoyed a status as administrative and commercial centres, and more generally as wellsprings of resources for the surrounding rural areas. Consequently, the notion of "medium-sized towns" has become established both as a field of study in urban geography (Demazière, 2014) and as a category of territorial development in its own right (Béhar, 2004).

2) Contrasting dynamics and highly diverse local situations

However, over the last 20 years or so, the dual movements of globalization and metropolization has called into question both the economic foundations and the scale of polarization of medium-sized towns, to the extent that some researchers have been moved to announce the "death of medium-sized towns" (Béhar, Estèbe, 2014). It is true that these towns are faced with multiple destabilization processes. The emergence of new mobility practices has deprived them of the administrative and commercial monopoly over their local area in favour of bigger towns and cities. Their productive function, often highly specialized and at the same time low-skilled, has

⁴ DATAR (Délégation interministérielle à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'attractivité régionale – Interministerial Delegation for Territorial Development and Regional Attractiveness) is a service attached to the French Prime Minister's Department. It prepares, deploys and coordinates the territorial development policies passed by central government.

⁵ "A metropolitan area [*aire urbaine*] (...) is a group of municipalities, without any enclaves or exclaves, formed by a primary urban area [*pôle urbain*] with more than 10,000 jobs together with those rural municipalities [*communes*] or urban areas [*unités urbaines*] where at least 40% of the employed resident population works in the primary urban area or in municipalities attracted by the primary urban area" (INSEE, 2014).

been compromised by post-Fordist reorganizations, which favour metropolitan areas. A number of medium-sized towns have been hard hit by the closure of civil-service departments as part of efforts to reduce public spending (i.e. the RGPP, or *Révision générale des politiques publiques* – General Revision of Public Policies – initiated in 2007), particularly in areas such as the judiciary, the military and the health service. Lastly, after long being considered attractive places with a generally younger profile than the rest of France, many medium-sized towns are now facing demographic decline and the ageing of their populations. Ultimately, it would appear to be the territorial development model for medium-sized towns that is profoundly and sustainably at issue here.

That said, some medium-sized towns are also showing signs of rude health in territorial terms, together with an ability to adapt to contemporary changes. For example, demographic and economic decline are neither a constant nor a foregone conclusion. First, medium-sized towns have, for the last 40 years, consistently represented around 20% of the total population and 30% of all urbanites in France. This demographic stability puts the repeated reports of their “irreversible marginalization” into perspective. Second, these towns have, to date, shown a certain resilience in the economic crisis: salaried employment has generally fared better than in other areas, in the face of adverse cyclical developments and structural transformations in the economy (DIACT, 2007).

The wide variety of local situations⁶ cannot be denied. Different medium-sized towns have followed different trajectories, as these are largely determined by the territorial backdrop against which they take place. In particular, their ability to perform “intermediation functions” (De Roo, 2005), at the interface between metropolitan areas and rural areas, would appear to be a necessary condition for their integration into positive productive and/or residential dynamics. Indeed, like DATAR, a number of researchers prefer to use the notion of “intermediate towns” in order to explain this participation in networks at different scales. This diversity has led to the establishment of typologies, which breaks with the monographical approaches that have long characterized the field of research into medium-sized towns (Demazière, 2014).

Certain medium-sized towns functionally form part of a metropolitan system dominated by a regional capital. This is the case, for instance, for some towns around Lyon (e.g. Valence) or Toulouse (e.g. Albi), which have established ties of economic, cultural and touristic

⁶ See, for example, the article by Christophe Demazière titled “Pourquoi et comment analyser les villes moyennes ? Un potentiel pour la recherche urbaine” published in *Métropolitiques* (in French): <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Pourquoi-et-comment-analyser-les.html>

interdependency with the larger city by acting, in a way, as satellite towns. This “metropolitan” integration is not, however, a guarantee of development, as the influence of a larger city can be a positive or a negative factor for local dynamism. A second group of medium-sized towns, situated further away from major metropolises, can benefit from their influence while continuing to dominate their own local territories. This is the case for places such as Rodez, Le Puy-en-Velay or Aurillac in the Massif Central, which have maintained industrial, commercial and administrative activities while continuing to be the most important towns in their respective local areas (Béhar, 2014) – but this balance is often fragile. Finally, a third group can be identified, comprising towns that are not only far from large metropolitan areas, but also located in regions adversely affected by globalization, particularly in eastern and central France. These towns are often marked by low levels of functional diversity, negative socio-economic trends and uncertain prospects for change. The town studied here, Nevers, falls somewhere between the second and third groups.

Ultimately, while the category of medium-sized towns has indisputably lost its validity, as it no longer designates a set of homogeneous situations or functions, it does crystallize highly contemporary issues and questions regarding territorial development.

3) Towns forgotten by public policy?

Medium-sized towns have long been a key element of territorial development policies. In the 1970s, they were even the subject of an *ad hoc* central-government policy: the *contrats de villes moyennes* (“contracts for medium-sized towns”).⁷ In a context of strong demographic growth, resulting in particular from the arrival of populations from rural areas and the deconcentration of industrial production, the aim of these contracts was to improve quality of life, create public services and facilities, and ensure economic and social development; however, they were rapidly abandoned in favour of more disparate and sporadic measures, such as the reorganization of universities (e.g. the “Université 2000” plan launched in 1990), the promotion of local production systems, and the development of territorial planning areas called “*pays*” (often corresponding to traditional geographical areas smaller than *départements*) that group together small urban centres and surrounding rural areas (Santamaria, 2012).

In the 2000s, after several decades of indecisive policies, the French central government seemed to abandon medium-sized towns. On the one hand, specific measures continue to target rural

⁷ Between 1973 and 1982, more than 70 French municipalities with 20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants, designated *villes moyennes* (“medium-sized towns”), benefited from a contract with the state as part of a national policy for territorial development initiated by DATAR.

areas in order to combat the “structural handicaps” that penalize them in the context of territorial competition. On the other, initiatives are directed towards the largest cities, in the name of national competitiveness, as illustrated by the government’s call for metropolitan cooperation in 2004, the creation of competitiveness clusters in 2005, or the Plan Campus for higher education and research clusters in 2008. Regional councils, for their part, seem to hesitate between a uniform treatment of medium-sized towns, in their capacity as an intermediate urban layer that contributes to the territorial equilibrium at regional level, and a more differentiated approach resulting from the metropolization process (Béhar, 2004). This dual uncertainty – in both national and regional policies – has to a large extent resulted in the strategic assistance of medium-sized towns being neglected, at a time when the strengthening of intercommunal structures⁸ is enabling them to stimulate and coordinate local policies. Left to fend for themselves, the leaders of these towns are faced with difficult choices: how are they supposed to walk the line between specialization and maintaining general functions, between proximity and openness, between competitiveness and safeguarding territorial equity? More generally, beyond promoting their assets, are medium-sized towns really in a position to develop specific strategies or do they have no choice but to reproduce metropolitan solutions “in miniature”?

The case of Nevers offers a striking illustration of both the vulnerabilities of these territories and the hesitations of those responsible who seek to overcome them.

II/ NEVERS: AN ILLUSTRATIVE CASE STUDY?

1) A medium-sized town like any other?

Nevers is the administrative centre of Nièvre, a still largely rural *département* (administrative area roughly equivalent to an English county or an Italian province) located in the west of the Burgundy region (see Map 1). The town occupies a site at a crossing point over the River Loire, approximately 200 km (125 miles) south of Paris, with which it has good road (A77 motorway)

⁸ Intercommunal structures or intercommunalities (*intercommunalités*) are indirectly elected governmental bodies that represent groups of municipalities (*communes*) and are able to pool certain resources. Broadly speaking, three kinds of intercommunal structures currently exist, with varying powers: *communautés de communes* (“communities of municipalities”), mostly found in rural areas, with limited powers; *communautés d’agglomération* (“agglomeration communities”), which cover mid-sized urban areas and have increased powers; and *communautés urbaines* (“urban communities”), which generally cover the largest urban areas and have greater powers still. A fourth type of intercommunality, called a *métropole* (“metropolis”), is currently emerging, which will concern the very largest urban areas and grant them the most extensive powers of any intercommunal structure. One *métropole* (Greater Lyon) will go a step further by taking on all functions previously exercised by the departmental council.

and rail links. The core municipality (Nevers proper) has just under 40,000 inhabitants (see Table 1); it is the most populous municipality⁹ of an urban area of around 70,000 inhabitants, the influence of which extends over the whole of the Nivernais area (31% of the population of the *département*).

Natural assets (such as the presence of the Loire and the proximity of the hills of the Morvan massif), a rich architectural and cultural heritage (former palaces and numerous religious buildings), traditional crafts (the production of faience pottery) and world-famous events (such as the French Grand Prix at the nearby Magny-Cours circuit) have all contributed to the town's reputation within France. However, in terms of its size, its historic role as a small provincial capital and its administrative and commercial functions, Nevers appears to be much "like any other" medium-sized town in France. Indeed, it shares a number of characteristics with Bourges and Moulins,¹⁰ two nearby intermediate towns.

The area around Nevers is faced with a number of negative trends, in several fields, but which impact different places in different ways. These trends must be considered in conjunction with the modes of governance present within the urban area.

Table 1 – Nevers and key territories: selected elements (2011)

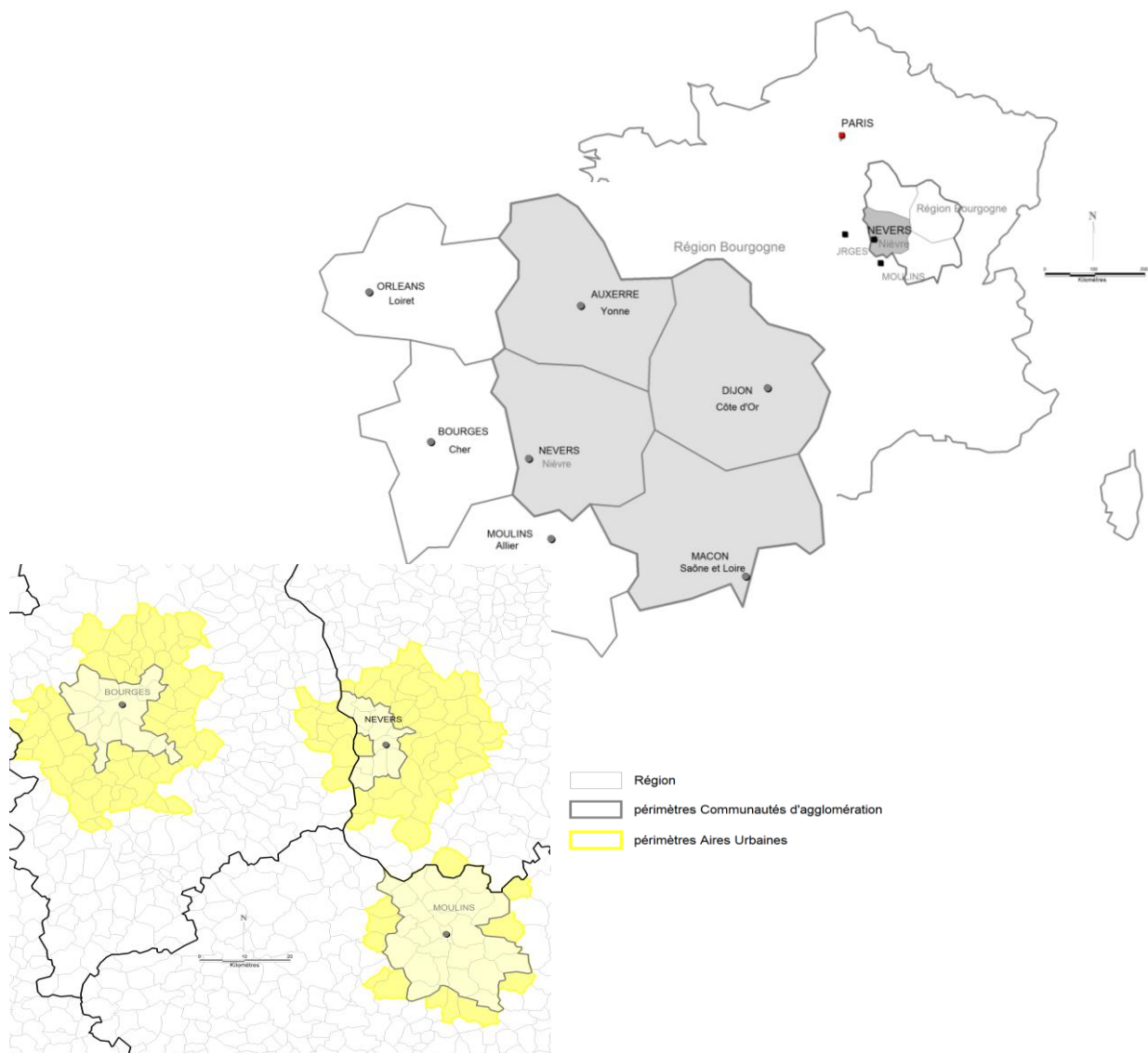
	Population in 2011		Area		Density
	inhabitants	%	km ²	%	inhab./km ²
Nevers	36,210	17	17	<1	2,090
Nevers aggro. comm.	68,734	31	219	3	315
Nevers metro. area	102,447	47	1,280	19	80
Nièvre <i>département</i>	218,341	100	6,817	100	32
Burgundy region	1,642,734	–	31,582	–	52

Source: INSEE – Population census data.

⁹ Varennes-Vauzelles, the second-largest municipality in the urban area by population, has just under 10,000 inhabitants.

¹⁰ Bourges (with a population of just over 66,000) is the administrative centre of the Cher *département* (immediately to the west of Nièvre); Moulins (with a population of just under 20,000) is the administrative centre of the Allier *département* (immediately to the south of Nièvre).

Map 1 – Nevers: location and key administrative boundaries



Translation

Région Bourgogne = Burgundy region

Région = Region

Périmètres Communautés d'agglomération = Boundaries of **agglomeration communities**

Périmètres Aires urbaines = Boundaries of metropolitan areas

Source: based on data from IGN and INSEE, 2014.

2) Multiple signs of decline

An analysis of demographic and socio-economic changes within the Nevers area over the last 30 years or so gives credence to the hypothesis that Nevers has experienced a certain downturn, reflected both in reversals of previous dynamics and the accentuation of negative trends.

Table 2 – Change in total population for Nevers and key territories (1982–2009)

	1982	1990	1999	2009	Change 1982–2009
Municipality of Nevers	43,013	41,968	40,934	37,470	-13%
Suburbs in Nevers aggro. comm.	29,298	29,803	29,323	28,703	-2%
Nevers aggro. comm. (total)	72,311	71,771	70,257	66,173	-9%
Outer suburbs not in aggro. comm.	34,279	35,795	35,510	36,983	+8%
Nevers metropolitan area	106,590	107,566	105,767	103,156	-3%
Nièvre <i>département</i>	239,635	233,278	225,191	220,199	-8%

Source: INSEE – Population census data.

Over the last three decades, the urban area has experienced a steady and marked decline in its population (see Table 2). In a context of long-term negative net migration, this demographic decline is primarily due to the gradual abandonment of the urban core, which seems to have accelerated since the start of the 2000s.¹¹

In parallel, the economic crisis that has prevailed since the start of 2010s has had a major impact on Nevers, as in many other parts of “disadvantaged France” (Davezies, 2012). The former manufacturing specializations of the Nevers urban area have been worst affected, to the extent that most job losses concern the industrial production sector and the key urban poles (the urban core and the most populous towns within the wider metropolitan area). Despite the resistance of a few specialized sectors, the components of the local production system are no longer sufficiently diverse and robust to resist repeated structural shocks (Davezies, 2009). While the presence-based economy (retail, services, construction) and the public sector (local government, civil service) have so far managed to limit the damage caused, the conditions for their continued existence are threatened, as the area’s “demographic motor” – essential for these sectors to function – is no longer truly economically active.¹² The risks of decline are therefore obvious.

¹¹ The average rate of change for the period 1999–2009 was -8% for the municipality of Nevers, -6% for the agglomeration community, and -2% for both the metropolitan area and the *département*, whereas these rates were all comparable during the preceding periods (at around -2% to -3%).

¹² See contribution by Laurent Davezies, Nevers seminar.

Table 3 – Change in the number of jobs in Nevers and key territories (1999–2009)

	Jobs in 1999	Jobs in 2009	Change in the number of jobs (%)
Municipality of Nevers	25,196	23,762	-6%
Suburbs in Nevers aggro. comm.	8,738	9,560	+9%
Nevers aggro. comm. (total)	33,934	33,322	-2%
Outer suburbs not in aggro. comm.	8,869	8,806	-1%
Nevers metropolitan area	42,803	42,128	-2%
Nièvre département	82,430	82,004	-1%

Source: INSEE – Population census data.

It is true that similar trends can be observed in Bourges and Moulins (see Table 4). These problems are a common trait of many intermediate towns located far from major metropolitan areas. However, in Nevers, the specificities of its urban organization (with an urban core significantly more densely populated than comparable towns, and lower levels of periurban development) and, above all, of its production system (with a high concentration of jobs in the urban core and a long-standing specialization in certain activities) seem to have made the downturn especially brutal.

Accordingly, one of the major challenges for public action is developing effective measures to counteract this decline.

Table 4 – Change in the number of inhabitants and jobs in Nevers, Bourges and Moulins (1999–2009)

		Population change	Change in the number of jobs
Core municipalities	Nevers	-9%	-6%
	Bourges	-8%	+1%
	Moulins	-9%	+1%
Agglomeration communities	Nevers aggro. comm.	-6%	-2%
	Bourges aggro. comm.	-4%	+5%
	Moulins aggro. comm.	-2%	+9%
Metropolitan areas	Nevers metro. area	-3%	-2%
	Bourges metro. area	-3%	+4%
	Moulins metro. area	-1%	+8%

Source: INSEE – Population census data.

3) **Powerful centrifugal forces within the territory**

These changes are not present to the same extent in each of the sub-territories of the Nevers area. The urban core continues to play a major role: it still polarizes the majority of the population and jobs of the urban area and the metropolitan area alike.¹³ This dominance diminishes rapidly, however, because of differentials in attractiveness within the urban area and a concentration of difficulties in its central area.

First, the departure of residents from the historic core has led to an increase in the proportion of vacant dwellings¹⁴ and a deterioration of the existing housing stock. By contrast, many suburban municipalities, especially in periurban areas, have seen a positive net migration, linked to the construction of detached family homes in suburban housing developments (see Map 3). Nevers, like many other intermediate towns, has not therefore benefited from the “return to city-centre living” observed in the last 15 years or so in large French cities. Furthermore, the populations that leave, stay and arrive are not the same:¹⁵ the places where the most affluent households reside are those most in demand by new arrivals (see Map 4), at the risk of accentuating socio-spatial contrasts.

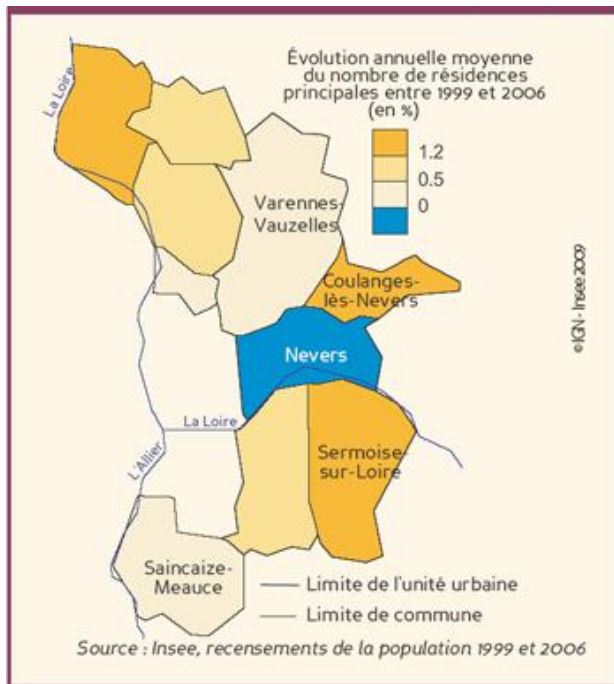
Second, the urban core (Nevers proper) has lost 1,500 jobs in the space of 10 years (see Table 3) and is now home to the majority of unemployed individuals in the urban area (69% of the total). The suburbs, on the other hand, continue to attract businesses, even in a bleak economic climate. They are especially attractive for the retail sector (69% of market share), which conforms to a process of concentration and specialization, even if this comes at the price of a growing disconnect between supply and demand.

¹³ It accounts for 71% of jobs and 57% of the population of the agglomeration community, and for 56% of jobs and 36% of the population of the metropolitan area.

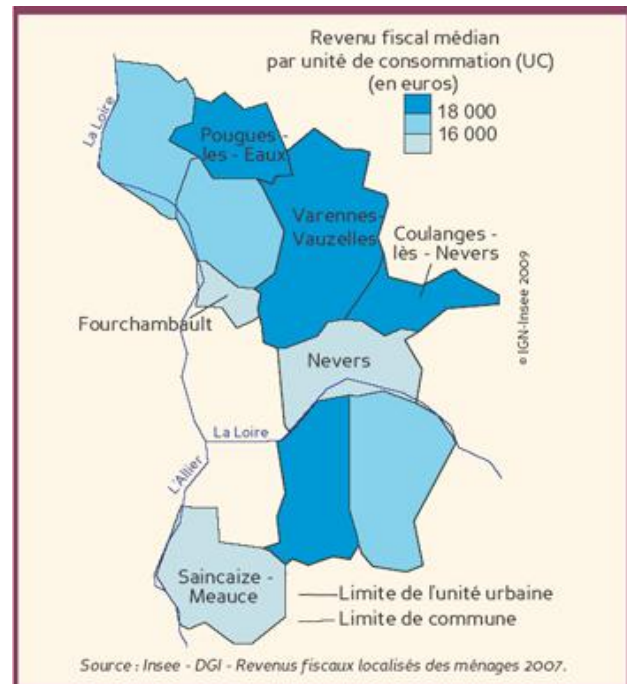
¹⁴ This rate increased by 52% between 1999 and 2009, standing at 14% in 2009 (compared with less than 10% in the metropolitan area).

¹⁵ Despite a certain degree of heterogeneity among the municipalities in the urban area, the average reported net income increased by around 3% in the urban core, compared with almost 5% in the suburbs (INSEE, 2014).

Map 3 – Change in the number of primary residences, Nevers aggl. comm. (1999–2006)



Map 4 – Median taxable income, in €/CU, Nevers agglomeration community (2007)



Translation

- Mean annual change in the number of primary residences between 1999 and 2006 (in %)

- Urban area boundary

- Municipal boundary

Source: INSEE – 1996 and 2006 population census data.

- Median taxable income per consumption unit (CU) (in euros)

- Urban area boundary

- Municipal boundary

- Source: INSEE/DGI – Localized taxable household income, 2007

In sum, in Nevers as in many other intermediate towns, the suburbs are increasingly competing with rather than supporting the urban core (Larmagnac, George-Marcepoil, Aubert, 2012). This increase in the demographic and economic weight of suburban municipalities is upsetting the existing balances within the urban area, while at the same time reviving inherited dissensions and rivalries from the past.¹⁶ In this context, the maintenance of a certain social and territorial cohesion is one of the major challenges facing local public action.

4) Governance put to the test: from constraints to opportunities

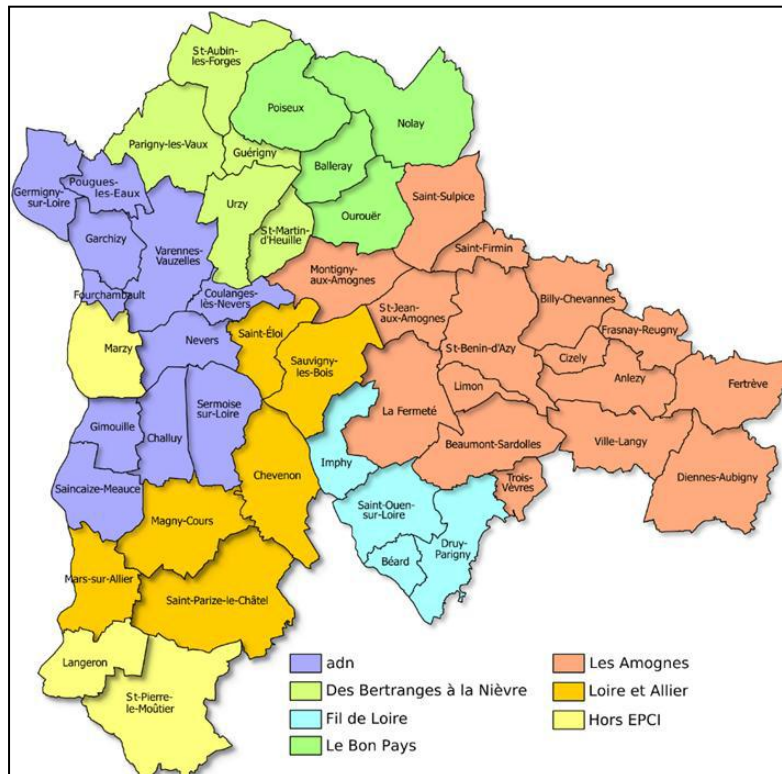
Local governance reflects the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the Nevers urban area. The agglomeration community is of recent creation (1997). It has gradually expanded,¹⁷ while at the same time seeking to consolidate and diversify its responsibilities, which remain focused on the management of local public services. The underlying context is complex: long-standing political divisions hinder municipalities in their attempts to develop a shared vision. Whether in terms of planning, amenities or local finances, the level of intercommunal integration remains minimal and disconnected from the way the wider local area functions. Indeed, the agglomeration community has signed a *contrat de territoire* (“territorial agreement”) with the Pays de Nevers – Sud Nivernais (which also includes 10 neighbouring “communities of *communes*”). It also forms part of an integrated development plan called a “SCoT” (*schéma de cohérence territoriale* – “territorial coherence scheme”) that is in the process of being set up and which will cover an area just over half the size of the Pays de Nevers – Sud Nivernais (see Map 5).

In view of the established trends towards the dispersal of territorial dynamics, the collective structuring of local action would appear to be a key issue. Challenges arise at two levels: for the town of Nevers, the aim is to re-establish its role as a driving force for territorial coordination; for the agglomeration community, it is a matter of easing the competitive tensions present throughout the territory. This raises the question of how much room for manoeuvre these bodies have in financial terms in order to achieve these objectives.

¹⁶ For example, with municipalities where economic activity was already present and which acted as hubs for particular sectors, such as Varennes-Vauzelles (home to a major repair centre for railway rolling stock and marked by a tradition of industry and blue-collar labour), or with municipalities that today play a key role in the urban area, such as Marzy (home to the largest shopping centre in the Nevers area, and which only very recently joined the agglomeration community).

¹⁷ It initially comprised 3 municipalities; it now comprises 12.

Map 5 – Intercommunal structures within the Pays de Nevers–Sud Nivernais and the territory of the SCoT du Grand Nevers



Note: “adn” stands for “Agglomération de Nevers” (i.e. the Nevers agglomeration community), while “Hors EPCI” indicates those municipalities that, until 1 January 2013, did not form part of any intercommunal structure.

Source: www.pnsn.fr and www.scotgrandnevers.fr

In the first case, at municipal level, the situation is generally favourable, albeit with slim margins for manoeuvre. For example, in terms of tax revenue, the density of economic activity and the value of land and residential property in Nevers proper means that the town is a little better off than the benchmark municipalities for the Nièvre *département* – and also than its neighbours Moulins and Bourges.¹⁸ That being said, the tax burden is particularly high in Nevers: elected officials cannot easily mobilize these resources, unless they wish to accept the political and/or electoral consequences. Nevers also benefits from substantial government grants. Municipal resources are therefore relatively plentiful and allow a high level of expenditure. Furthermore, as the town is in the happy position of having little debt, the municipal council could take out new loans if so wished to help fund the creation of new amenities.¹⁹ Given the

¹⁸ In 2010, the tax potential per inhabitant was €860 in Nevers; €834 in the benchmark municipalities (20,000–50,000 inhabitants); €742 in Moulins; and €791 in Bourges (source: www.collectivites-locales.gouv.fr).

¹⁹ In this respect, it has a great deal more freedom than other towns, such as Bourges (which invests more, but is also much more restricted by accumulated debt).

context of austerity, however, local authorities – and medium-sized towns in particular – are increasingly concerned about their ability to accumulate savings that can be used to fund such projects (FMVM, 2013). The dynamics of local public investment are at stake, along with the production of externalities for local development. Nevers has so far managed to escape the current deterioration of economic conditions.

In the second case, the agglomeration community has a number of means of action available, but is penalized by the fact that the intercommunal integration is incomplete. In Nevers, as in Bourges and Moulins,²⁰ the agglomeration community's expenditure remains significantly lower than that of individual municipalities, especially that of the urban core.²¹ The ability to intervene, or even merely to negotiate, is therefore essentially in the hands of municipal authorities. This imbalance is exacerbated in the Nevers urban area, where the agglomeration community provides a modest proportion of the local tax resources, while that provided by the municipality of Nevers is much higher.²² It is up to local politicians – at both municipal and intercommunal levels – to decide whether they intend to give their agglomeration community the necessary resources to meet the challenges at hand, so that it can play a more involved role in terms of amenities, planning and policy-making, with a view to structuring the area's territorial dynamics and diversity.

The brief overview presented here shows how difficult it is for Nevers and the surrounding area to separate those issues linked to external factors from those arising from internal trends. Within the urban area, there are often contrasting dynamics at play. Formulating local public action in a way that is both relevant and coherent is not a given, especially in cases where there is an accumulation of negative representations permeated with declinism, sapping the confidence of local society.

²⁰ In 2011, €293 per inhabitant for Nevers agglomeration community (AC), €256 for Moulins AC and €297 for Bourges AC respectively; these figures cover current and capital expenditure, net of tax redistributions to member municipalities (based on information from www.collectivites.locales.gouv.fr).

²¹ When expressed in euros per inhabitant, expenditure by Nevers was over six times higher than that of the agglomeration community.

²² The funding potential of Nevers represents 62% of the total funding potential of all 11 (in 2010) member municipalities of the agglomeration community, for a demographic weight of 57%. The second-biggest contributor was Varennes-Vauzelles (representing 17% of the total funding potential, for 14% of the population of the agglomeration community). Similar imbalances can be observed in the Bourges urban area. By contrast, the distribution is much more balanced and “multipolar” within the Moulins agglomeration community (Navarre, Rousseau, 2013, AdCF).

III/ FROM DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES TO PUBLIC POLICIES: BETWEEN HESITATIONS AND TERRITORIAL ADAPTATIONS?

In Nevers, local public action has to address hesitations and dilemmas not just in determining major strategic choices for the development of the local territory, but also in defining the scale and content of public policies.

1) Strategic hesitations regarding the scope of territorial development

Strategic hesitations exist in three main domains: economic development, governance, and the way the urban area functions.

First and foremost, as in all medium-sized towns, leaders in Nevers are faced with difficult choices regarding economic policy. On the one hand, some seem convinced of continuing development opportunities based on the rise of certain productive sectors, primarily the automotive and timber industries. Both sectors are situated at the interface between local expertise and national policies promoting ecological transition and re-industrialization. On the other hand, there are various stakeholders who wish to focus instead on developing the presence-based economy, with the aim of making this a foundation stone for renewed dynamics. To this end, strengthening the area's touristic attractiveness – by more effectively promoting its natural and cultural heritage²³ – and, more generally, promoting “amenities” for residents and the area's “quality of life” (e.g. far from the rat race – and the pollution – of big cities; the area's environmental qualities; sociability built on acquaintanceship processes, i.e. small-town friendliness) could emerge as major policy objectives. These two approaches are no doubt more complementary than competitive. A third option would be to control and organize degrowth in the area along the lines of the “slow cities” movement,²⁴ based on the complementarity between different stakeholders and the promotion of local resources; it is about “doing more with less”. However, this is a path that local decision-makers have not yet embarked upon, owing to the numerous attendant negative connotations.

Second, although everyone seems to agree that Nevers must establish complementarities with other territorial units at different scales, an inter-territorial strategy for the urban area has yet

²³ Nevers, with its many remarkable buildings and important religious sites (e.g. cathedral of SS Cyr and Julitte, St Bernadette's church), welcomes significant numbers of tourists and pilgrims, albeit only for short stays with limited spending in the local economy. The development of this sector suffers from an image problem and a lack of coordination between various promotional initiatives.

²⁴ The *Cittaslow* movement (from the Italian *città* [“city”], and the English “slow”) around 100 towns and cities across Europe who are committed to slowing down the pace of their residents' lives. It shares similarities with the degrowth and New Urbanism movements.

to be developed. Does a better means of integrating the area into a metropolitan system, at the macro-regional level, need to be found? And, if so, on which city would it be based: Paris, which already has polarizes the Nivernais area to a certain extent; Clermont-Ferrand, a city with which Nevers has many functional links; or Dijon, so as to reinforce the existing regional complementarity within Burgundy? Or, alternatively, should the priority be to strengthen cooperation at the meso-regional level, by developing relationships with the neighbouring medium-sized towns of Bourges and Moulins? Informal forms of cooperation already exist, but a solid and sustainable substrate seems essential for achieving virtuous forms of resource and knowledge-sharing. In this respect, coordinating higher-education and retail provision, developing touristic and cultural partnerships, and establishing synergy between the three production systems – which possess a number of complementary aspects – could help to strengthen both the specificities of all three towns and their vocation as intermediate spaces.

Whatever course of action is chosen, one of the prerequisites at local level is the calming and/or consolidation of relations between the member municipalities of the agglomeration community. The current impasse that seems to be affecting the area shows that sharing resources for the management of urban services is no longer enough; governance has broken down. In this context, **thirdly**, it is the role played by the urban core – and more generally the operation of the wider urban area – that is at the heart of current debates. Is the weakening of the urban core inevitable, to the point where it is reduced to a small number of centrality-related functions that ensure a minimum level of public facilities in the town? Or, on the contrary, is it better to reinforce Nevers' historic central role within the agglomeration community, as the abandonment of Nevers proper would have a significant adverse impact on the attractiveness of both the town and the urban area as a whole, running the risk of increasing social and spatial contrasts? In any event, the rising uncertainty on this issue calls for the development of collective visions and projects that go beyond parochial self-interest and local rivalries. In Nevers, more than elsewhere, the aim must be to invent fresh ways of working together that transcend ideological dogma, institutional constraints and the current political limitations.

2) Public policies: between standardization and territorialization

These strategic hesitations, particularly those concerning historic centrality functions in the urban area, take various forms in the field of public policy.

In the field of **transport and urban mobility**, leaders in Nevers are, like many of their counterparts in intermediate towns, faced with different imperatives that are difficult to reconcile. On the one hand, they seek to participate in national strategies to combat various

trends in common with large cities (increased energy and land consumption, increasing car dependency, deterioration of the living environment and the area's functional balance). On the other hand, public action must take into account not only the specificities of these areas (less dense and more heterogeneous urban fabrics, lower demand for mobility, a modal split largely dominated by car use), but also financial constraints affecting residents and local authorities alike: in Nevers, the low purchasing power of a portion of the population is an obstacle to mobility, while investment capacity is restricted. The solutions enacted are still very often duplications “in miniature” of those implemented in large cities. They are not necessarily the most economic or the most appropriate responses. They primarily involve improving existing transport provision (the local public transport network was completely reorganized in 2007) and the creation of new targeted services (town-centre shuttles, transport on demand, sometimes car-sharing), while the most demanding tools (pedestrianization, redefining traffic flows, reorganizing car-parking facilities) are used sparingly. Here, more than elsewhere, the challenge is to promote “virtuous” mobility practices without compromising the accessibility of a historic core that has already suffered significant decline.

In the field of **retail and trade policy**, the challenges are even more specific and require new responses. Broadly speaking, two contrasting registers of action could be mobilized. The first involves following the example of the largest medium-sized towns and cities (such as Angers, in the Loire Valley, or Saint-Nazaire, on the Loire Estuary near Nantes), by redefining the perimeter of the town centre in order to make it the true heart of the urban area. In Nevers, certain recent initiatives, such as the construction of the Espace Colbert shopping centre²⁵ on the edge of the pedestrianized part of the historic town centre, seem to be heading in this direction. But the relative failure of this retail development shows that such a goal is probably not realistic in the local context. The second involves structuring and specializing expansion in the suburbs, in order to reinforce Nevers' trade catchment area and limit the displacement of trade within the Nièvre *département*. In both scenarios, there is a risk of encouraging surplus supply, resulting in a loss of value for the retail sector and, ultimately, more commercial wastelands, at a time when the proportion of vacant premises in the town centre (15%), together with the resulting negative impacts, are already worrying. Would it not be better to consider reducing the size and scope of the town centre? In this case, the task at hand would be to support the transformation of the public space, in particular where there are many vacant premises, in order to halt the downward trend in the urban core.

²⁵ This shopping centre, built on a brownfield site close to the centre of Nevers, has 11,000 m² (118,400 sq. ft) of floor space, comprising an anchor store (a major national supermarket chain) of 3,100 m² (33,400 sq. ft) and around 40 smaller stores centred on a well-known chain. The centre is struggling to fill all of its premises, and shopper numbers are low.

The relative powerlessness of public action is also evident in the field of **local housing policies**. The challenges present, while not comparable to those observed in metropolitan areas, are no less complex and crucial. In Nevers, property prices are low; there is no pressure on the housing market – whether in terms of social housing or the private sector – and the pace of construction is particularly low. New housing production essentially consists of detached houses in the suburbs. Despite the diversity of means available in terms of public action (with incentives rather than coercive methods), the policies implemented are struggling to reverse these dynamics based on the aspirations of households. Renovation operations that have helped return a certain amount of housing in the urban core to the market have not been enough to buck these trends. The profitability of such operations remains limited, and too low to attract private developers. The guiding of residential trajectories via a policy of targeted social accession to home-ownership, advocated in the PLH (*plan local de l'habitat* – “local housing programme”), has not had the expected effects. Similarly, while some suburban neighbourhoods are facing the same problems of socio-spatial relegation as in large cities, restructuring the supply of social housing has been faced with a dual obstacle: the withdrawal of state support, for which medium-sized towns like Nevers are not a priority, and the level of rents for new housing, which are too high for the least creditworthy tenants. Finally, young people are not necessarily able to find accommodation in the area, owing to the low level of supply in the private rental sector. One of the aims here is to enable students to live in Nevers, in the absence of any dedicated halls of residence within the urban area.²⁶ As this example shows, local policy-makers are still seeking housing solutions that will trigger beneficial trends for certain areas of housing supply, certain populations, or certain parts of the urban area.

²⁶ The “Coup d’jeune” (“Younger Look”) operation initiated by the Pays de Nevers – Sud Nivernais seeks to alleviate this problem by proposing the renovation of approximately 100 dwellings intended for 16-to-30-year-olds.