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Small and medium-sized towns: Situation, development and prospects in different types of areas

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Ulrike Grabski-Kieron, Annabelle Boutet

SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED TOWNS – SITUATION, DEVELOPMENT AND PROSPECTS IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF AREAS

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Abstract

The situation, development lines and perspectives of small and medium-sized towns in Germany and France are compared and similarities and differences within the central place systems and the spatial planning of both countries are discussed. With different approaches to definition, these towns have received new attention in both countries in recent years, albeit with different focal points. The discussion covers the positions and lines of development of these towns in the respective central place systems; the perspectives of their future development regarding the strengthening of central place functions, their attractiveness as residential and economic locations, and contexts of rural regional development and services of general interest. In addition, aspects of research on small and medium-sized towns as well as approaches to spatial policy in both countries are addressed.

Keywords

Central place system – regional planning – regional and urban policy – demographic change – growth and shrinkage – urban-rural relationship – development of rural regions

1 Introduction

In both France and Germany, small and medium-sized towns find themselves in a field of tension concerning their overall spatial development with, on one hand, the impacts of metropolisation, urban growth and the dynamic development of urban regions, and on the other hand, the effects of far-reaching structural and functional transformation in rural areas, which is also associated with stagnation or peripheralisation in a number of regions. Although small and medium-sized towns in both countries have their own spatial and territorial planning contexts with specific development paths and prospects, the parameters for the development of this type of settlement are changing. This is triggered by demographic developments, stronger economic and spatial interrelationships, the development of mobility and accessibility, and also by changed preferences regarding places of residence and work. Various regional effects can be observed. The position of small and medium-sized towns in the core systems of both countries is under close scrutiny. Simultaneously the intrinsic urban qualities of these types of towns seem to be increasingly less tangible. Digitalisation and e-commerce are affecting the development of the town centres while administrative reforms intended to centralise services contribute to the transformation.

In light of such transformation processes, small and medium-sized towns in both countries are subject to continuous spatial observation; they are on the political agenda and in recent years have increasingly been at the centre of debates in the media and in wider society. Parallel to this public focus, spatial and planning research in both countries has also been characterised by a growth in interest in the topic of small and medium-sized towns. However, this has occurred in the context of national research traditions and perspectives, influenced by society's specific perception and comprehension of the underlying problems, and last but not least in line with policy requirements. There is growing awareness that small and medium-sized towns must be understood as specific types in the scheme of towns and cities. Their future prospects depend greatly on their relations with the region and with neighbouring towns.

2 Small and medium-sized towns in Germany and France – Characteristics and spatial planning classifications

2.1 Small and medium-sized towns in Germany – two different types of towns

The programme of continuous spatial observation in Germany (BBSR 2019a) does not classify small and medium-sized towns as one statistical category but differentiates between them as separate types of settlements¹. A distinction is made between the two types using two different categories of criteria: statistical population data on one hand, and criteria related to the central place functions associated with each type on the other. Towns with less than 20,000 inhabitants are classified as *Kleinstädte* (small towns), towns with between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants as *Mittelstädte* (medium-sized towns). For medium-sized towns, a threshold of 50,000 residents is used to identify the sub-group of large medium-sized towns (more than 50,000 residents; see Figure 1). Only 22 % of medium-sized towns (112 of 624; BBSR 2019b: 7) are categorised as *große Mittelstädte* (large medium-sized towns) with a population of over 50,000.

Towns with a population of between 5,000 and 20,000 residents are counted as small towns in the strict sense of the term and their minimum basic central place functions are listed, most of these functions are usually existent. Places with less than 5000 residents are known as *Landgemeinden* (rural municipalities)²

In the German urban system, the 2,106 small towns (46.5% of all categories in 2017) and the 1,719 rural municipalities (38%) are categories worthy of attention (figures according to ARL 2019: 3f; see Figure 1). In terms of area, the small towns account for by far the greatest proportion of German territory (45.4%), followed by the rural municipalities (35%) (Figure 1). 29.2% of the country's total population live in small towns, while small and medium-sized towns together account for almost 58% of the total population (Figure 1).

The distribution of small and medium-sized towns (Figure 2) reflects historical and contemporary development trends. The German urban system has been characterised by fundamental continuity for centuries, although this has been overlaid by changes in spatial structure and settlement (also see Friedrich/Hahn/Popp 2009).

1 More precisely: The basis for statistical comparison in the BBSR programme of continuous spatial observation in Germany are the Einheitsgemeinden (unitary municipalities) or Gemeindeverbände (municipal associations): in Germany the Gemeinde (municipality) is the political-administrative unit with the fundamental right to self-government. Smaller municipalities with between 3000 and 5000 residents are grouped together as municipal associations. NB: in the individual federal states these municipal associations are given different names (e.g. Verbandsgemeinde, Amt) depending on the state constitution/municipal code.

2 More precisely (BBSR 2019a; see Footnote 1): in the programme of continuous spatial observation in Germany, the term Landgemeinden (rural municipalities) refers to municipalities within a municipal association with less than 5,000 inhabitants and/or no basic central place functions (as understood in the statistical definition of a town).

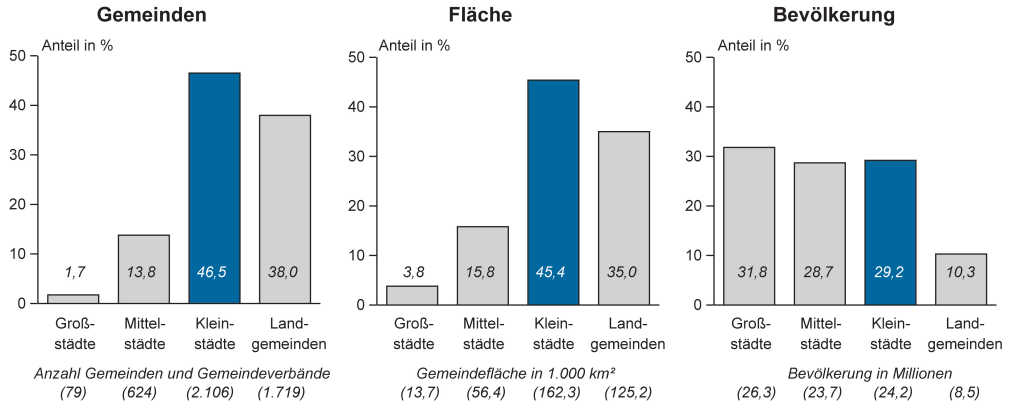


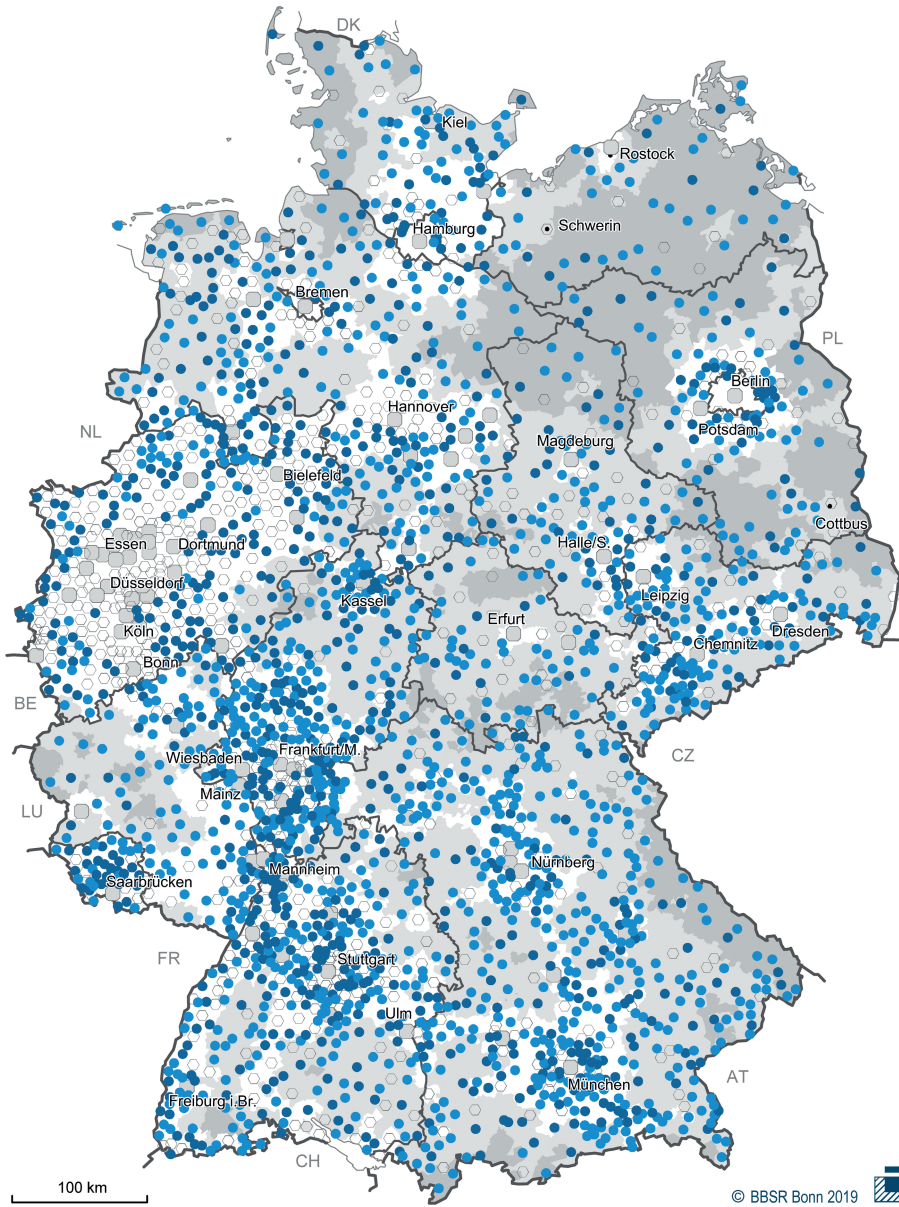
Figure 1: Dominance of types of towns and cities (left to right: cities, medium-sized towns, small towns, rural municipalities) in Germany according to the criteria ‘number, area in 1,000 km² and population in millions’ (based on data from BBSR 2017) /Source: ARL 2019

Since the 1990s scientific criticism has intensified, arguing that the statistical categories employed no longer adequately reflect the new realities of spatial planning (greater interdependences, better accessibility, changed mobility, urbanisation, differences between West and East Germany) (also see Werring 2017). It is also argued that the categories are obsolete due to changes in municipal structures, such as those introduced in some *Länder* (federal states) by administrative and municipal reforms. As early as 2003, Leindecker (2003) pointed out that there were various types of medium-sized towns that differed from one another in terms of their large-scale settlement structure, proximity to agglomerations, regional development context and location in West or East Germany (see Section 2.7).

The current observation and monitoring programme has therefore refined the categorisation of towns according to their locational factors and characteristics of interdependencies. Thus a distinction is made between small and medium-sized towns in ‘central locations’ and those in ‘peripheral locations’. In order to statistically capture these locations, models of *Großstadregionen*³ (city regions) and *Stadt-Umland-Regionen*⁴ (urban-suburban regions) are used as spatial-statistical units of reference

3 *Großstadregionen* (city regions): comprising of cities as high-order supply centres with their surrounding territories. The urban-rural relations are constructed on the basis of population density and the intensity of commuter flows. The BBSR uses the term *Großstadregion*, which is translated here as ‘city region’ and may evoke different connotations because the relevant terms and definitions differ between national systems.

4 *Stadt-Umland-Regionen* (urban-suburban regions): these regions consist of urban cores and their surrounding areas. They are based on commuter flows and accessibilities and cover the whole of Germany outside of the *Großstadregionen* (see above) (BBSR 2019b, also see ADAM 2019).



Small Towns

- Larger Small Towns (10,000 to less than 20,000 residents)
- Little small towns (5,000 to less than 10,000 residents or at least sub-functions of middle order centres)

Location

- central
- peripheral
- very peripheral

Other types of town

- Cities (100,000 residents or more)
- Medium-sized towns (20,000 to less than 100,000 residents)

Datenbasis: Laufende Raumbewertung des BBSR
 Geometrische Grundlagen: Gemeindeverbände (generalisiert), 31.12.2017 © GeoBasis-DE/BKG
 Bearbeitung: A. Milbert

Figure 2: Types of towns and municipalities in Germany 2017, based on data from BBSR) / Source: ARL 2019

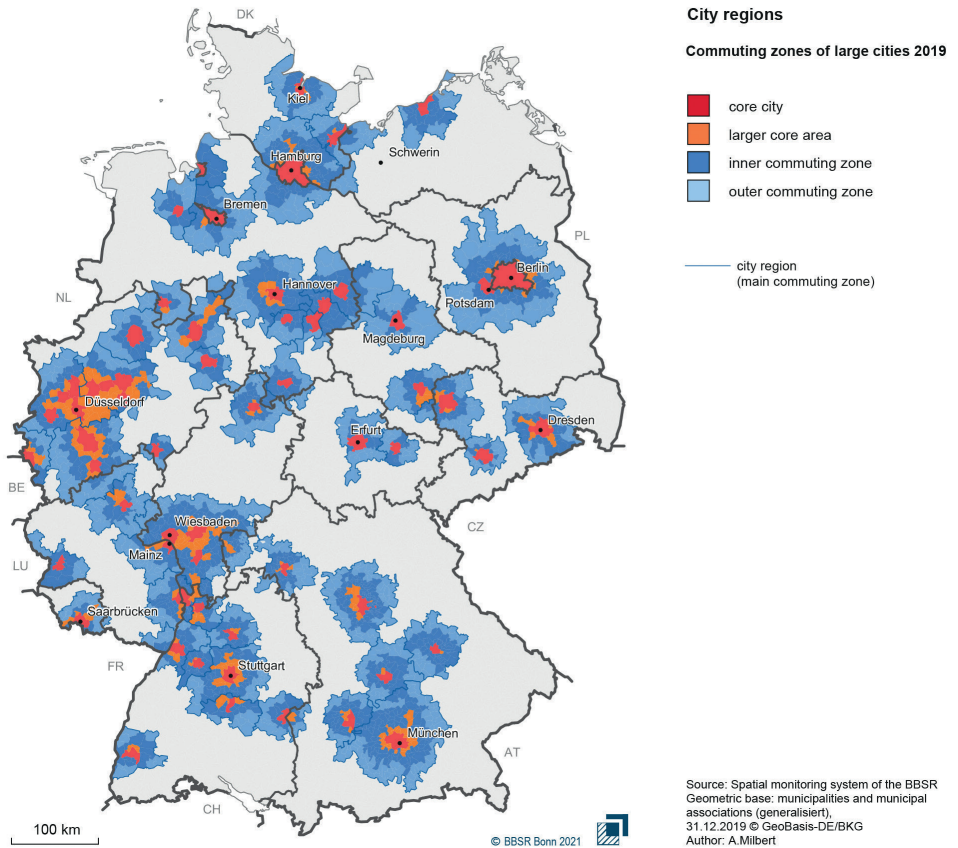


Figure 3: Types of city regions in the programme of continuous spatial observation in Germany / Source: BBSR (2019a); map: BBSR (2021)

and the development trends of the individual towns are presented⁵ (Figure 3, also see Section 2.7).

2.2 Small and medium-sized towns in France: a very stable urban system

Since the 1970s numerous investigations have examined the definition of French medium-sized towns. They have all highlighted two dimensions, using either both together or each individually: 1) the population (between 15,000 and 200,000 residents, depending on the definition) and 2) the supply functions carried out in the residential area (centrality particularly in relation to retail and services, also for the intra-regional area) (Santamaria 2012). Whatever the definition used, France has between 200 and 250 medium-sized towns.

⁵ In addition to the programme of continuous spatial observation, a 2019 study of the situation and development of small towns in central locations introduced the methodological approach of clustering to the debate. Here small towns and regions are grouped in clusters according to functional and structural characteristics. These are then evaluated with regard to specific development trends and prospects, taking into account locational and demographic characteristics (BBSR 2019d).

In 2018 the *Commissariat général à l'égalité des territoires* (CGET – General Commission for Territorial Equality) proposed that medium-sized towns should be defined by three criteria⁶: *unités urbaines* (urban units) with more than 20,000 residents, defined as a *grand pôle urbain* (large urban pole) by the *Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques* (Insee – National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) and not belonging to one of the 22 *aires urbaines*⁷ (urban areas) included in a *métropole*⁸. In the six departments without any *unités urbaine* (urban units) of more than 20,000 residents, the prefectures were selected. According to this definition there are 203 medium-sized towns in France, 191 of them are in mainland France and 12 in the departments overseas (CGET 2018a). They account for almost 23% of the French population.

Reflecting the legacy of a hierarchical vision of the urban system, small towns are defined as kind of ‘mirror image’ of the medium-sized towns: they have less inhabitants and those that have central place functions have less services and retail facilities than the medium-sized towns. Again without a uniform definition, there are between 1,600⁹ and 2,200¹⁰ small towns in France. In a country characterised by the dominance of the capital city and a relatively small number of large cities, the small and medium-sized towns are at the heart of the French territorial network.

These types of towns have a very strong image, rooted in their long history. In contrast to Germany or England, where urban structures were significantly changed by the Industrial Revolution, France is characterised by a very stable urban system. The historian Bernard Lepetit (1988) highlighted the strong similarities between the town plans of France in the 1950s and at the beginning of the 19th century. A number of small and medium-sized towns became important trading places or religious centres, housed the seats of the prefects or sub-prefects, and in the *Trente Glorieuses* (Glorious Thirty, i.e. the years of economic boom c.1945–1975) became important locations for economic growth. The persistence of the French urban system (Vadelorge 2013) can still be seen in the organisation of France’s territorial administration as many of the small and medium-sized towns have remained the seats of the prefects and sub-prefects.

6 <https://www.insee.fr/fr/metadonnees/definition/c1501> (28 April 2022).

7 In 2010 Insee used the ‘urban areas’ zoning to describe the influence of cities on the whole territory: <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/1281191> (28 April 2022).

8 A *métropole* is a *intercommunalité* that brings together several municipalities ‘in one piece and without an enclave’ which join forces within ‘a space of solidarity to work out and lead together a project for the planning and economic, ecological, educational, cultural and social development of their territory in order to improve its competitiveness and cohesion’. Constituted on a voluntary basis, the status of a *métropole* is accessible to groups of more than 400,000 inhabitants in an urban area of more than 650,000 inhabitants.

9 In 2012, there were 1,666 so-called *bassins de vie* (life basins) in France, including 1,644 in metropolitan areas and 22 in the French overseas departments and regions. According to Insee, the *bassins de vie* is the smallest territory in which the inhabitants have access to the most common facilities and services.

10 In 2010, there were 2,292 urban units in France with just over 51 million inhabitants, i.e. around 78% of the population.

In addition to their strong roots in French territorial structures and in the French mentality, the common perception is that small and medium-sized towns often correspond to the image of an ideal town, situated between the city and the countryside and offering a high-quality habitat. According to the *Baromètre des territoires 2019*, conducted by the *Villes de France* and the market research company Ipsos with the support of the *Banque des territoires*, 43% of the French population want to live in medium-sized cities, compared with 35% who prefer a rural municipality and 22% a city (Villes de France/IPSOS 2019).

2.3 Position in German spatial planning

In recent years small and medium-sized towns have attracted more attention within spatial planning due to the visible spatial effects of demographic change. The guiding principle of spatial planning entitled “Safeguarding services of general interest” (BBSR 2017) focuses primarily on medium-sized towns and emphasises their role in maintaining such services in rural areas. Medium-sized towns are thus indispensable ‘buttresses’ in the urban system, ensuring the achievement of the spatial planning principle of decentralised concentration (also see Adam/Baudelle/Dumont 2022). In German spatial planning this principle is conceptionally linked to the *Zentrale-Orte-Konzept* (Central Place Theory) and the countrywide system of coordinated supply districts; it is at the same time an expression of the federal state’s mission to ensure that all sub-regions are characterised by equality of opportunities, participation in prosperity and security of supplies¹¹. This conceptual spatial planning approach is closely linked to the mandate to maintain equivalent living conditions throughout Germany (also see Gustedt et al. 2022 and Adam/Baudelle/Dumont 2022). Over the years the principle has stimulated much discussion about the further strategic development of the central place system¹², with a focus on the role of small and medium-sized towns.

The federal states stipulate levels of centrality and the categorisation of central places in their individual state planning (also see Paris/Gustedt 2022). A three-tier system of *Oberzentren* (high-order centres), *Mittelzentren* (middle-order centres) and *Grundzentren* (low-order centres) has been established in almost all federal states. The allocation of higher order sub-functions to middle-order and low-order centres is common practice. Small, low-order centres which only fulfil some of the basic functions or provide limited local supplies are currently not designated as centres in most of the state development plans. A number of federal states do not designate any low-order centres in their state plans.¹³ This reflects the different approaches of the federal states, which aim to adapt the central place system to the varying spatial situations and, particularly, to provide targeted development options. However, this

11 It is an expression of social balance and of justice based directly on the social state principle and on the ban of discrimination anchored in the German Basic Law (GG. Art. 20 and Art. 3).

12 with the components: reduction of central towns and degrees of centrality, checking and definition of capacities, introduction of shared functions, definition of standards of accessibility, and scrutiny of minimum standards of supply and services (BBSR 2017).

13 E.g. Saxony-Anhalt, Brandenburg, Hesse, Saarland and Lower Saxony.

normative degradation of small towns in state planning has consequences for the attractiveness and development opportunities of the towns. Critical discussions concerning the provision of services of general interest thus focus increasingly on the declining significance of small towns by emphasising the indispensable role they play in providing local supplies. Combined with the supply function of medium-sized towns, this is seen as vital for maintaining the principle of equivalent living conditions in all sub-regions of the country (BMI 2019a; 2019b).

2.4 Position in the spatial structure and spatial development of France

In 2018 the French government began a large programme to revitalise the town centres of 222 medium-sized towns. The *Action cœur de ville* (Heart of Town – City Centre Action) is coordinated by the *Agence nationale de la cohésion des territoires* (ANCT – National Agency for Territorial Cohesion) and mobilised 5 billion euros over five years, involving numerous state partners and actors (e.g. *Caisse des Dépôts* – Saving Banks, *Agence nationale de l’habitat* – National Housing Agency, *Action logement* – Rental Action). Each urban revitalisation package forms part of a territorial development project carried out by the municipalities and the federations of municipalities. The projects are based on an agreement with the government which focuses on five priorities: renovation and restructuring of housing in town centres, balanced economic and commercial development, accessibility and mobility, upgrading of public space and cultural heritage, and – last but not least – access to public institutions and services.

In September 2019 the prime minister announced the publication of a plan targeting small towns entitled *Petites villes de demain* (Small Towns of Tomorrow) (ANCT 2022). The focus here is on strengthening the central place functions of the towns, reinforcing their role for the surrounding region and putting them in a position from which they can tackle the demographic, economic and social challenges of the future. This plan was implemented in 2020 by the ANCT (ANCT 2022).

2.5 Research on small and medium-sized towns in Germany

In recent years urban and spatial planning research has focused increasingly on small and medium-sized towns and on the intertwining urban-rural regions in which some of them are embedded. The start of the new millennium was marked by increased discussion of demographic change and its predicted impact on towns and regions. Research in the field of small and medium-sized towns focused primarily on the latter (see the summary in BBSR 2019b). Contrasting spatial developments were identified. On the one hand, there was dynamic growth and suburbanisation in the catchment areas of urban regions and, on the other hand, the stagnation or decline of towns and rural regions; this highlighted the differentiated nature of the development of this type of town. The supply functions of these towns in various regional contexts as well as their position in Germany’s polycentric urban system was subject to scrutiny. In many rural regions the focus was on the preservation of services of general interest and on the sustainability of infrastructures. The discourses about the guiding prin-

ciples of spatial planning (see BBR 2012; Issaoui/Sinz 2010; BBSR 2017) also encouraged varied considerations of this type of town. Over the years, research in the planning sciences, in architectural disciplines and in urban sociology has helped to clarify the great degree of differentiation and the varying growth trends of medium-sized towns – also compared to small towns.

In contrast, small towns in all their variety were systematically neglected as a distinct type of town (ARL 2019). Most recently, however, research into small towns has emerged as an independent field in Germany, responding to calls for systematic, theoretical and applied scientific approaches to the small-town type of settlement (see the summaries in BBSR 2018a; ARL 2019). Research into small towns and research into rural regions have been brought closer together by, *inter alia*, discourses about the future of rural regions in Germany, their services of general interest and the quality of life they offer, and by changes in attitudes towards and perceptions of rural areas. Small towns and their local retail and housing functions have become a focus of attention. The future perspectives of these towns continue to be much discussed in the light of digitalisation, migration, changing work environments and lifestyles (Maretzke/Porsche 2020; BBSR 2018a; 2018b; Graffenberger 2019).

In both fields of research (small towns and medium-sized towns), large recent investigations have tackled qualitative aspects of urban structures and life and have thus significantly furthered understanding of the distinctiveness of these types of towns. The research has focused on e.g., urban socio-culture, communication, governance, urbanity and building culture (see the summaries in Baumgart/Overhageböck/Rüdiger 2011; Werring 2017). These perspectives also underline the necessity to develop differentiated typologies.

Investigation into urban regions is another pillar of research in this field, providing findings especially about medium-sized towns and their processes of transformation in regional contexts. The focus here is on interactions between towns and their surroundings, related driving forces and the effects on sub-regions. Adam (2019) has traced and summarised the lines of development of the changing perspectives of this field of research. Since the 1990s, discourse about land take, suburbanisation and re-urbanisation has encouraged research into these phenomena. Investigation has particularly focused on large cities and their surroundings. Attention has only recently turned towards the notion that medium-sized towns display independent development trends and logics as urban cores in more extended suburban and rural regions. They can no longer be explained simply in terms of functional interactions with and dependencies on larger towns and cities. It is rather the case that developments in such towns reflect changes in demography, accessibility, lifestyles, migratory behaviour and the broader economy. In a recent investigation on suburbanisation in cities and urban-rural regions¹⁴, Adam (2019) innovatively combined data sets on demography, employment trends and land development to reveal the great heterogeneity of development trends in urban systems and different regional contexts, thereby underlining the ‘new’ significance of medium-sized towns.

14 ...of the programme of continuous spatial observation in Germany.

Pilot projects run by the federal government¹⁵, funding programmes¹⁶ and initiatives by the federal government and the states, e.g. the programme *Kleinstädte in Deutschland* (Small Towns in Germany)¹⁷ and the founding of a federal *Kleinstadtakademie* (Small Town Academy)¹⁸, have prepared the ground for further knowledge production and practice-oriented implementation (see Dehne et al. 2022). Last but not least, continuing discussions on the validity and interpretation of the principle of equivalent living conditions, as anchored in the *Grundgesetz* (GG – German Basic Law), encourages spatial planning research on small and medium-sized towns in Germany (see Berlin-Institut für Bevölkerung und Entwicklung 2019; also see Adam/Baudelle/Dumont 2022).

2.6 Research on small and medium-sized towns in France: shrinkage and peri-urbanisation

In France, much research on medium-sized towns relates to their demographic decline and also shows that small towns are often affected by demographic shrinkage. However, this phenomenon mainly affects towns in regions with an industrial tradition. Thus Manuel Wolff, Sylvie Fol, Hélène Roth and Emmanuèle Cunnigham-Sabot (2013) reveal that there are five different types of demographic decline processes affecting towns (halted decline, recent decline, discontinuous decline, marked decline in the 1980s and 1990s or in the 1970s and 1980s, continuous decline) and that towns in the north-east of the country, characterised by an industrial tradition, are particularly impacted.

Julie Chouraqui showed that two-thirds of French towns with trajectories of demographic decline are also weakened from the point of view of employment. These towns are concentrated in the north-east, the ‘diagonal of low densities’¹⁹, but are also found in the west, in Brittany and in Normandy (see Figure 4).

15 ExWoSt research on the potential of small towns in peripheral locations: www.exwost-kleinstaedte.de (28 April 2022).

16 E.g. Federal urban development programme: www.staetebaufoerderung.info (28 April 2022).

17 <https://www.bmi.bund.de/DE/bauen-wohnen/stadt-wohnen/stadtentwicklung/kleinstaedte-in-deutschland/kleinstaedte-in-deutschland-node.html> (28 April 2022).

18 <https://www.kleinstadtakademie.de/> (28 April 2022).

19 The ‘diagonale des faibles densités’ (‘diagonal of low densities’) or ‘diagonale du vide’ (‘diagonal of the void’) refers to a succession of territories distributed from the north-east to the south-west: <http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/glossaire/diagonale-faibles-densites> (28 April 2022).

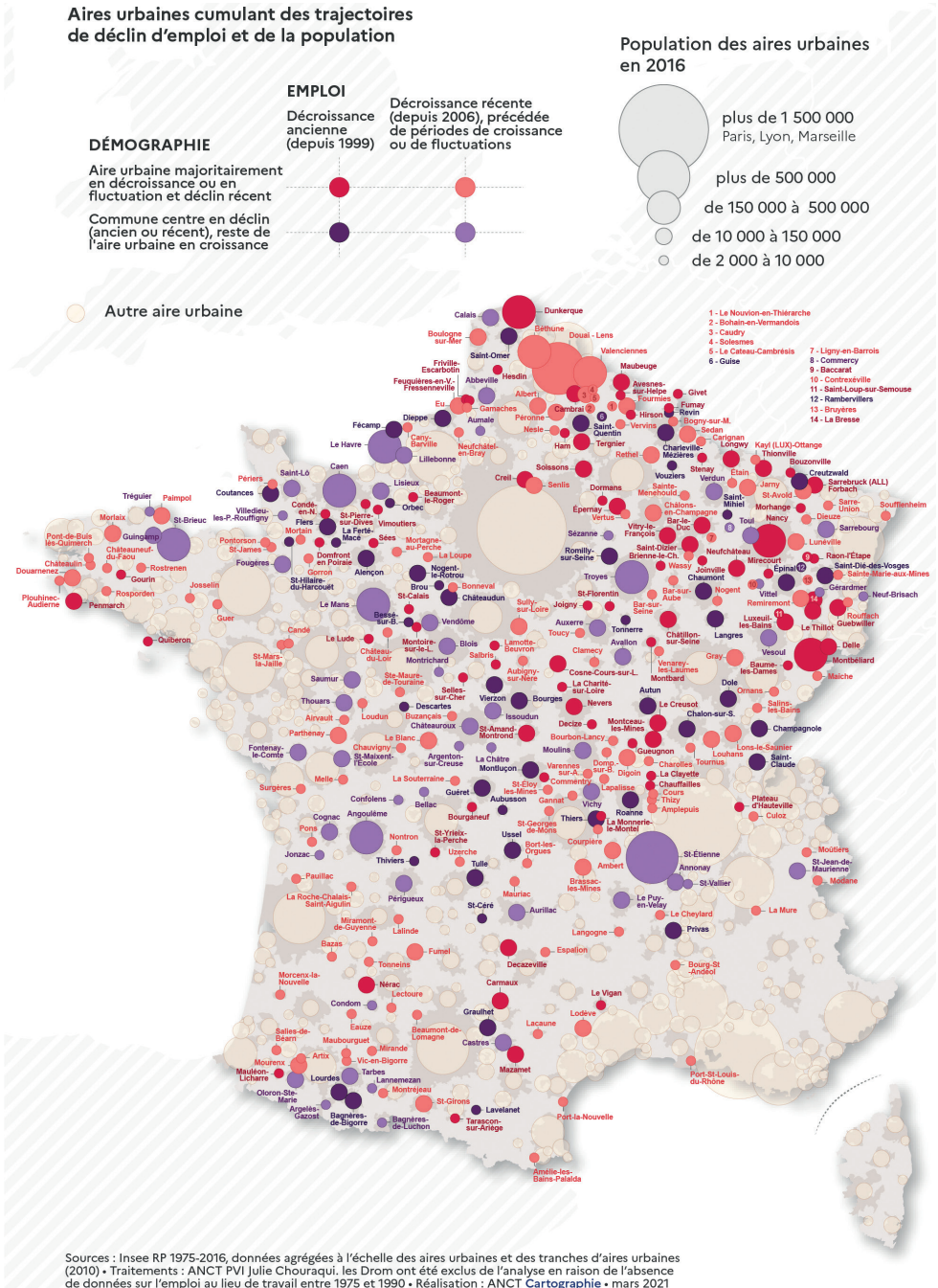


Figure 4: Urban areas with cumulative trajectories of employment and population decline / Source: INSEE RP 1975-2016; draft: Julie Chouraqui, ANCT 2021

English translation of captions:

Demography: urban area predominantly shrinking or fluctuating with recent shrinkage; central municipality shrinking (older or recent), rest of the urban area growing.

Employment: older decline (since 1999); recent decline (since 2006) preceded by periods of growth or fluctuation.

Other urban area

Population of urban areas in 2016: over 1,500,000; over 500,000; between 150,000 and 500,000; between 10,000 and 150,000; between 2,000 and 10,000.

Investigations about the decline of supply structures in small and medium-sized French towns have also been published. Matthieu Delage, Sophie Baudet-Michel, Hadrien Commenges, Julie Vallée and Pascal Madry (2019) define and analyse developments between 1979 and 2014, creating an index to capture the decline in supplies. Two different developments are revealed. Between 1979 and 1988 only the very small towns remained relatively unaffected by the decline in commercial supply structures, while the other small and medium-sized towns felt the impact of the trend. Since the 1990s, however, all three sizes of town have displayed a similar loss of commercial supply structures. The authors discovered that towns which offer employment as well as housing have been better able to preserve a diversified commercial structure than thinly populated municipalities with purely residential functions.

Research on peri-urbanisation offers a complementary perspective. On a national scale the *couronnes périurbaines* (peri-urban regions)²⁰ have become the most homogenous territories: income disparities are not particularly pronounced and standards of living are fairly high (CGET 2018b). The researcher Eric Charmes (2019) shows that the phenomenon of peri-urbanisation explains the decline of certain town centres and the dynamic growth of certain peri-urban villages. The latter are characterised by remarkable demographic growth and are generally experiencing a process of peri-urbanisation. They have entered the field of influence of a town or city and become satellite settlements. Only the centres of the most important *métropoles* can successfully make a stand against the peri-urban villages and thus continue to attract middle-class residents, retail and business. In many smaller towns the situation differs as they have less distinct resources and their commercial sectors are less diversified and competitive than those of the commercial centres in the peri-urban regions.

2.7 Developments and prospects in Germany

In terms of demographic change, recent developments in the towns and regions of Germany are characterised by the small-scale spatial juxtaposition of growth, decline and stagnation. It is also still possible to trace differences in trends in West and East Germany (Figure 5), although smaller scale developments clearly modify this contrast.

In many places, there is a great deal of pressure to adapt the allocation of functions undertaken within spatial planning. This derives from current demographic and socio-cultural processes linked to migration, as well as to changed lifestyles and locational preferences. The re-evaluation of business locations in light of international economic trends, regional innovation and digitalisation also plays an important role here. Finally, the town centres face challenges arising from structural transformation in retail and changes in urban planning and development requirements due to the increase in project-based, participative planning processes (Ries 2019)²¹.

²⁰ According to INSEE, a *couronne périurbaine* designates all the municipalities of an urban area excluding its urban centre.

²¹ In an investigation of medium-sized towns in peripheral rural regions, Ries (2019: 124f) analysed the developmental patterns of socio-economic transformation processes in medium-sized towns and demonstrated their significance for central place functionality.

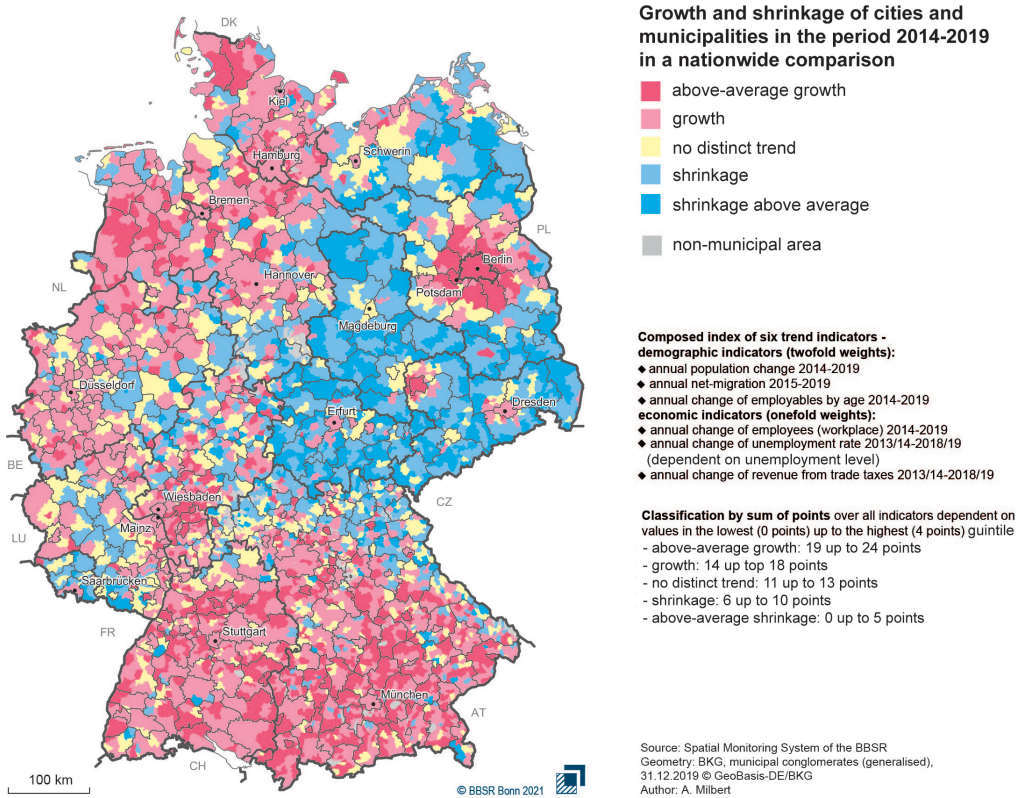


Figure 5: Growth and shrinkage in towns and municipalities / Source: BBSR 2018c continuous spatial observation

Determinants of spatial location and regional linkages remain extremely significant for the future of small and medium-sized towns. Differentiated interactions between regional development and the development of small and medium-sized towns may be observed. Demographic data on urban regions show that medium-sized towns have experienced clear growth in recent years. It is not only the inner catchment areas of the regional centres which profit from growing interlinkages and improved accessibility, but also increasingly the extended catchment areas. Recent developments in the big city regions have shown that the trends of re-urbanisation and suburbanisation are not mutually exclusive (Adam 2019). Many medium-sized towns have also been able to score in terms of jobs and employment trends²². It is not uncommon for them to attract employment away from the large urban centres, as shown for instance by the region of Kassel with its economically strong medium-sized centres in the surroundings. Towns with attractive residential and employment locations tend to be characterised by dynamic land take and open space transformation. By designating development areas, the growth-focused, medium-sized centres contribute considerably to the continued high levels of land take in Germany.

²² Wandzik, G. (2020): Investigated success factors for positive development in large medium-sized towns.

Many of the developments discussed lead to urgent problems for small towns – not only in terms of the allocation of functions undertaken within spatial planning. Although the *Institut für Länderkunde* (IfL – Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography) suggests that the functions of just over half of such towns remained largely constant from 2001 to 2017, about a third have lost central place functions (Bode/Hanewinkel 2018, see Figure 6). In contrast, only every tenth town was able to gain significance. It should be noted that these different development paths of municipalities are also rooted in administrative and municipal reforms, particularly in a number of the states in eastern Germany (see Figure 6).

The small towns in the urban regions also take on some of the functions of the larger centres, although to a lesser extent than the medium-sized towns. However, small towns do not necessarily share the path of development of their region or that of the medium-sized towns (Adam 2019; BBSR 2019c). They particularly profit from the growth of their region if they provide a convenient residential location, a significant service sector or jobs in industry or technology. Other relevant factors influencing the development paths of small towns are links to neighbouring municipalities, inter-municipal accessibility, settlement structure and built fabric and, not least, population structure (BBSR 2018b).

In peripheral locations, small towns – in addition to medium-sized towns – not only assume residential functions but also provide employment and act as centres of local retail. They thus contribute towards the development or stabilisation of rural areas. However, the development paths of this type of town also vary with the initial socio-economic and infrastructural conditions (BBSR 2019c; RIES 2019). Growth in employment and positive population trends need not go hand in hand. Small towns do not necessarily profit from positive development in the region if the aforementioned influencing factors are unfavourable. Thus small towns with good job offers attract large inflows of commuters without changing their attractiveness as places of residence. Furthermore, many small towns struggle to maintain the sustainability of their infrastructure in light of high rates of out-migration. The challenges caused by the out-migration of young people and the increasing aging of the population are exacerbated by the strained budgets of the municipalities. A lack of scope for action and limited investment capital hinder further development. This is particularly true in light of the fact that many small municipalities in rural areas actually consist of numerous smaller settlements, which often leads to virulent distribution issues.

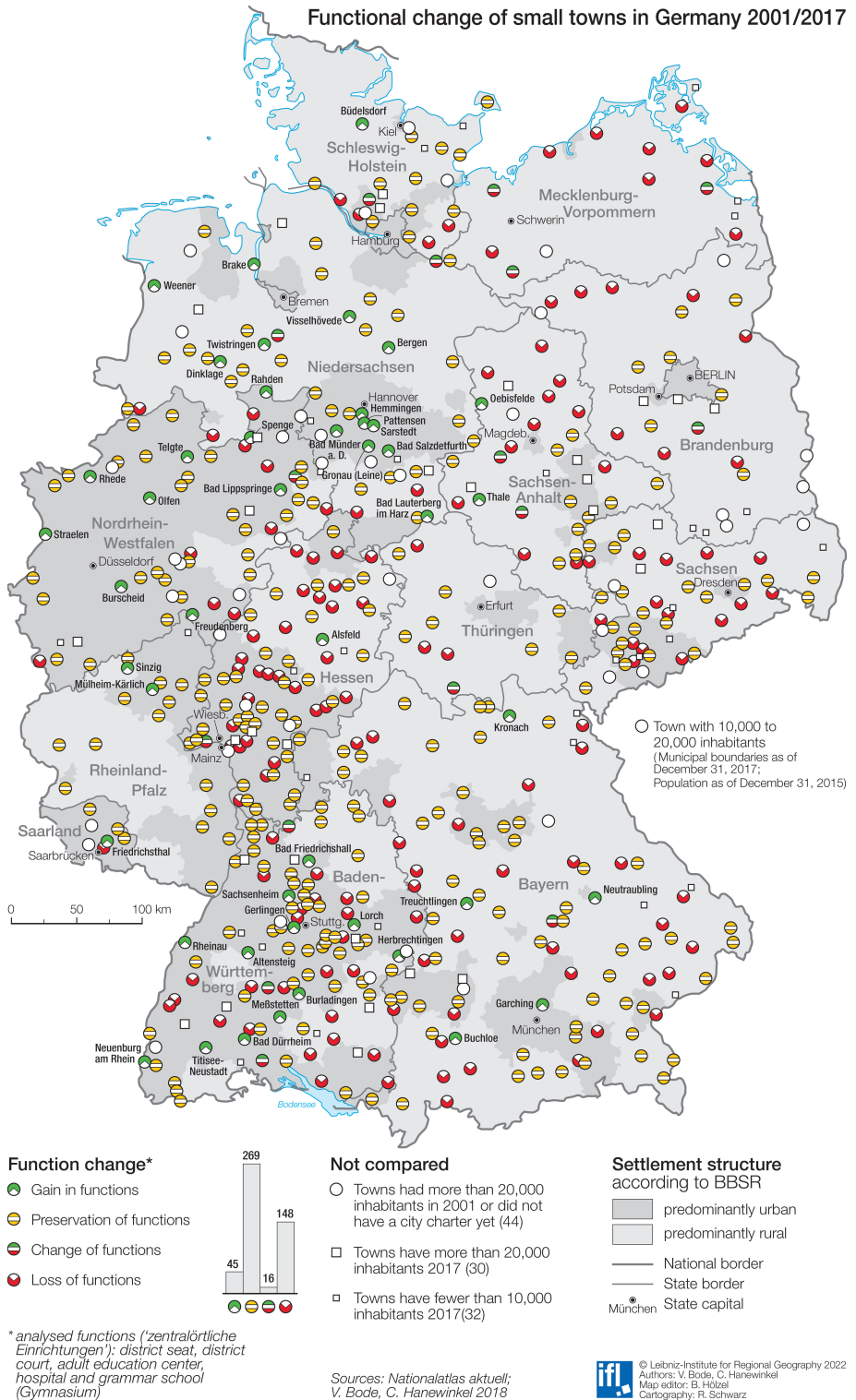


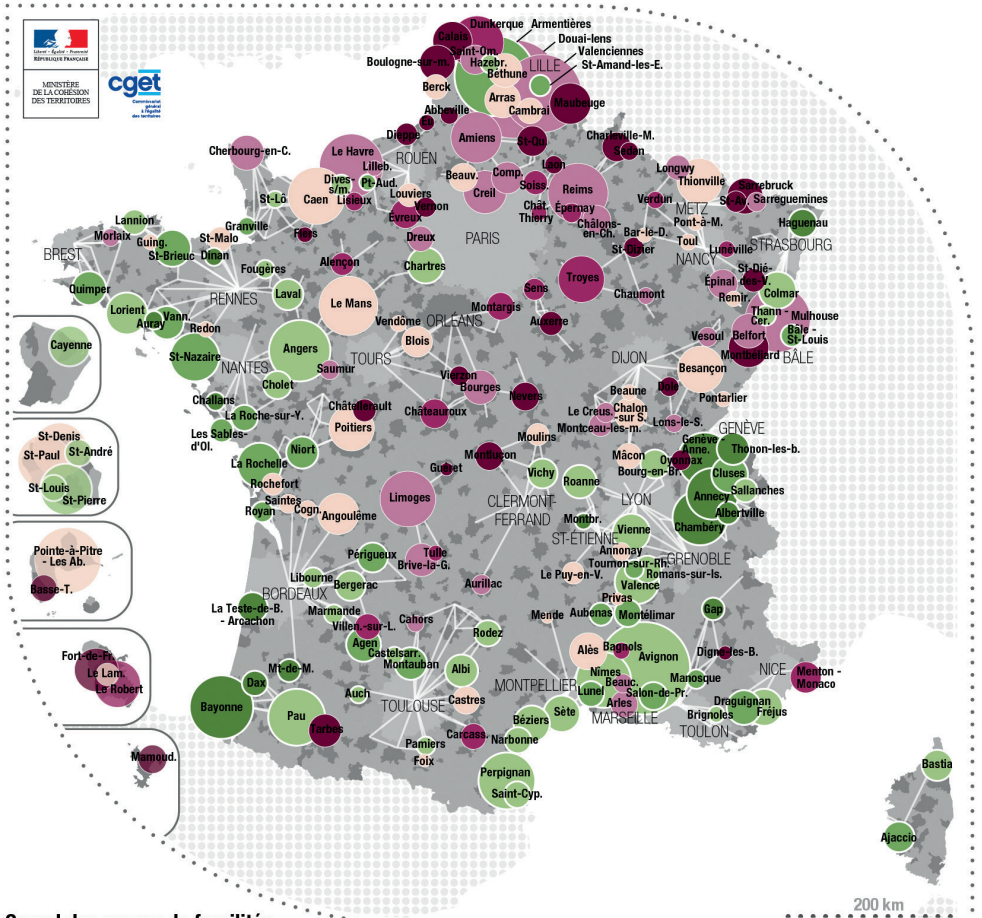
Figure 6: Changes in the importance of small towns 2001–2017 / Source: Bode/Hanewinkel 2018

2.8 Small and medium-sized French towns between fragility and macro-regional development trends

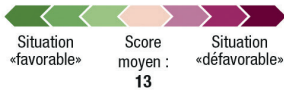
In recent decades in France, it has become clear that there is great awareness of the problems facing small and medium-sized towns and strong attachment to them. Terms like crisis, decay and structural dislocation are a few of those used to describe these types of towns. Metropolisation, peri-urbanisation and deindustrialisation are seen as the most important factors leading to decline because they encourage the out-migration of the population and the displacement of activities out of the centres. However, it can be argued that these factors have actually affected entire macro-regions with their small and medium-sized towns, cities and rural areas more strongly than they have impacted on just small and medium-sized towns as independent categories (CGET 2019).

Analyses by the CGET confirm research findings about the influence of macro-regional trends on medium-sized towns²³: the most threatened towns are located along a large north-eastern arc connecting Alençon, Boulogne-sur-Mer, Lunéville, Nevers and Villeneuve-sur-Lot (see Figure 7). There are about 30 particularly vulnerable medium-sized towns that are situated in struggling labour market regions. Analysis of medium-sized towns in the territorial system reveals three possible positions: the medium-sized town is integrated in metropolitan development trends, or the medium-sized town causes the polarisation of a department, or there is functional interaction between medium-sized towns. None of these positions seems to be more advantageous than the others: it all depends on the complementary relations created between medium-sized towns and their urban systems. It can be advantageous for a medium-sized town to be integrated into a metropolitan region, but it can also be equally damaging. A number of medium-sized towns act as important development poles in their departments and demonstrate dynamic growth. Others are disadvantaged by unfavourable spatial relations with the main development centres and their catchment areas. It should also be noted that interactions among medium-sized towns can be both complementary and competitive.

23 Medium-sized towns are defined here as urban units with more than 20,000 inhabitants of the 'major urban centre' type according to Insee's urban area zoning that are not included in one of the 22 urban areas encompassing the institutional métropoles. In the six départements without an urban unit of more than 20,000 inhabitants, the urban units whose central town is the departmental capital were considered. There are thus 203 medium-sized towns in France, including 191 in mainland France and 12 in the overseas departments.



Cumul des scores de fragilités



Les scores de fragilité des villes moyennes sont basés sur 3 thématiques :

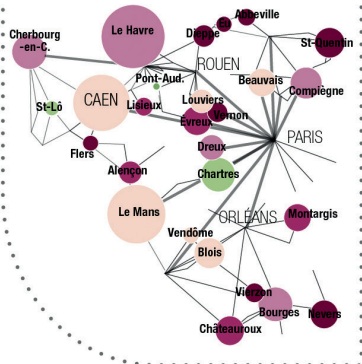
- Dynamique démographique : taux de croissance annuel moyen de la population (2008-2013)
- Dynamique économique : taux de croissance annuel moyen de l'emploi (2008-2013)
- Fragilité sociale : taux de pauvreté (2013)

Pour chaque thématique, le score d'une ville moyenne est attribué en fonction du décile de sa position au sein de l'ensemble des villes moyennes.

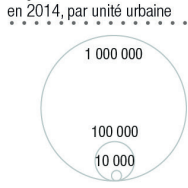
Exemple : pour les scores de fragilité démographique : les 20 villes moyennes ayant le taux de croissance le plus faible ont un score de 9, les 20 suivantes un score de 8, etc...

SOURCES : CGET, CNRS GÉOGRAPHES-CITÉS, IGN GEOPLA, 2015 • RÉALISATION : CGET/OST/ OBSERVATOIRE DES TERRITOIRES - CELLULE CARTO / AG, MG, FP • 2017
D'APRÈS LES TRAVAUX DE C. VACCHIANI MARCUZZO, F. PAILLUS ET S. GERBOUR PLACES SOUS LA DRI, IN CARTAN CNRS GÉOGRAPHES-CITÉS, 2012

Le Système interrégional de Paris



Population



Aire urbaine

- Grande
- Moyenne
- Petite

Systèmes urbains régionaux



Le territoire national est structuré par un ensemble de **systèmes urbains**. Ces interdépendances entre aires urbaines sont mises en évidence en cumulant différents indicateurs de flux comme les relations domicile-travail, les migrations résidentielles, les réseaux de transport, les relations sièges-établissements, etc. Les territoires urbains entretiennent plusieurs niveaux de relation. Un premier niveau de 26 systèmes urbains a pu être mis en évidence.

Figure 7: Fragility scores for medium-sized towns / Source: CGET 2018a

English translation of captions:

Cumulative fragility scores: ‘favourable’ situation, average score: 13, ‘unfavourable’ situation

Fragility scores for medium-sized towns are based on three factors: Demographic change: average annual population growth rate (2008-2013)

Economic change: average annual employment growth rate (2008-2013)

Social fragility: poverty rate (2013)

For each factor, the score of each medium-sized city is attributed according to the decile in which it finds itself within the group of medium-sized cities

Example: for the demographic fragility scores: the 20 medium-sized cities with the lowest growth rate have a score of 9, the next 20 have a score of 8, etc...

The interregional system of Paris

Population in 2014, by urban unit

Urban area large, medium-sized, small

Regional urban systems

The national territory is structured by a set of **urban systems**. These interdependencies between urban areas are demonstrated using different indicators such as home-work relations, residential migration, transport networks, head office-branch relations, etc. Urban areas have several levels of relationships. A first level of 26 urban systems has been identified

3 Development paths and prospects of small and medium-sized towns in Germany and France

The perceptions and appreciation of small and medium-sized towns have changed in recent years in Germany. The current development paths and problems of these types of towns are leading to the rethinking of their positions in urban systems. Thanks to their own urban qualities, they have the potential to develop new urban socio-cultures with innovative forms of civil society action and new ways of living and working. They offer opportunities for new lived urban-rural linkages, e.g. as market forums for regional products, for landscape experiences or for education and training in the region. The importance of small and medium-sized towns as anchor points for supplies of services of general interest is heightened by the need to support innovative activities in rural areas. However, the ongoing transition provides many varied challenges. In recent years, both the federal and the state level have increased their support and finance for the development of towns and municipalities (see Dehne et al. 2022).

As discussed, small and medium-sized French towns are characterised by differentiated development paths that are particularly linked to the development trends of the macro-regions. It is foreseeable that these lines of development will be increasingly influenced by current ecological, digital, demographic and technological changes. With an eye to the future, newer discourses suggest that – despite the widely held image of decline – the shrinking small and medium-sized towns may actually be the source of new urban models that focus on residential attractiveness, wellbeing and environmental health. The industrial tradition of towns can also be used to develop new ecologically acceptable forms of production, work and consumption. Other discussions focus on demographic change and the aging of the population and identify small and medium-sized towns as locations in which a large proportion of older people may well prefer to live in the future. It is worth noting in this context that by the year 2050 every third resident of France will be over 60 years of age. This explains why the

National Agency for Territorial Cohesion helps these towns to carry out processes of reflection and future-oriented action by providing a programme entitled *Fabriques Prospectives*²⁴.

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