

The Small Towns conundrum: What do we do about them?

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Small Towns have long been seen as an important element in Europe's urban structure, currently around 24.2% of the European population live in them. Despite this, we know relatively little about them and there is insufficient recognition of the role they have as important providers of services, employment, housing, etc. Moreover, there is a tendency to view them as a homogenous category. However, this paper argues what is required is a more disaggregated understanding of them in order to develop policy approaches relevant to their situations and to genuinely include them in approaches that seek to enhance economic, social and territorial cohesion. Drawing on research from the ESPON TOWN project, I will try to throw some light on the issues around small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs) and what to do about them if they are to continue to thrive.

Keywords:

Small Towns,
European,
policy,
cohesion

Introduction

It is widely accepted that we live in what might be termed the 'urban age' in which globally the majority of people live in urban areas (although see Brenner–Schmid 2014 for a dissenting voice). Perhaps understandably there has been a tendency to focus on 'big cities', albeit somewhat attenuated more recently by a growing recognition of the role of what are termed 'second-tier cities' (see Cardoso–Meijers 2016). Nevertheless, the vast majority of contemporary research and policy development has concentrated on large cities and metropolitan regions (i.e. 'big' or 'global' places) within the context of globalising forces and international competition. The problem with this focus is that it fails to differentiate among the different types of 'urban areas' in which people live and work and the relationships between them. In other words the 'rich mosaic' that constitutes the 'urban structure' has been neglected. This is somewhat ironic in relation to Europe given that it has long been asserted that small towns are a key element, both historically and in the modern-era, of Europe's urban structure – they are considered to be an important part of the continent's urban fabric. As a result, what are termed 'small towns' have largely been

neglected (cf. McCann 2004, Bell–Jayne 2009, who articulate the case for a greater understanding of the role and significance of small places). The ESPON TOWN project¹, on which much of this article draws, sought to remedy this deficiency and to explore and explicate the role and position of small towns and develop policy options to address their, varied, situations and contexts.

In this article I begin by briefly discussing the methodological issues related to defining ‘what a small town is’ before setting out some of the basic information about where people in Europe live and the position and number of small towns within this framework and the different ‘types’ of small town according to their regional location. It is important to emphasise that the focus is on small towns, although often we find a somewhat confusing use of terminology as there is frequent reference to SMSTs, perhaps reflecting the different definitions of what constitutes a small town and a medium-sized town in different European countries. However, the focus here is on small towns with a population between 5,000 and 50,000. The article then considers the possibilities to address the situation of small towns and illustrates the possible policy approaches that might be adopted using a place-based approach (Barca 2009).

What is a Small Town?

In the ESPON TOWN project the basic parameters for the research were set by the ESPON research specification which required the project to focus on ESPON TOWN project, on small towns with populations between 5,000 and 50,000 across Europe. This was deliberately intended to address the imbalance in terms of research and policy noted above. Nevertheless, this did not resolve the issue of what constitutes a town/place; what follows draws on the arguments developed by Servillo et al. (2017) and Servillo et al (2014a, Ch. 2). In the TOWN project, we drew on three key methods of defining a town: the morphological approach, the functional approach, and the administrative approach. It is important to note that taken in isolation none of these three approaches resolves the definitional problem of what is a town. In essence we adopted a ‘territorialist approach’ that enveloped the three approaches identified above, although it should be noted that this was a ‘compromise’ because we recognised that there was no ‘perfect’ way of defining ‘what constitutes a small town’. Within this framework, we focussed on a morphological approach building on work carried out by DG Regio (2011) and Dijkstra–Poelman (2012) which allowed the project to develop a relatively uniform interpretation of urban settlements across the EU territory and surmount different national interpre-

¹ <https://www.espon.eu/programme/projects/espon-2013/applied-research/town-%E2%80%93-small-and-medium-sized-towns>

tative criteria. Using this approach we created an initial definition of small towns as having the following characteristics:

- Polygons with a total density (average density of all cells included) between 300 and 1,500 inhabitants/km² and a population between 5,000 and 50,000 inhabitants;
- Polygons with a total density of more than 1,500 inhabitants/km² but a total population of less than 50,000;
- Polygons with a total population of more than 50,000 but a total density of less than 1,500 inhabitants/km². (Servillo et al. 2014b, p. 18.)

Building on this basic morphological approach, which allowed us to produce a cartographical presentation of small towns across Europe, we then deepened our understanding of what is a small town through the investigation of their functional roles within their wider regional context and their socio-economic characteristics. So while the multifarious national administrative definitions of what, according to national traditions, was defined as a town were not ignored, they were subordinate to both morphological and functional definitions.

Where do people in Europe live – the role of small towns

While it is estimated that approximately 70% of the European population live in cities (see CEC 2011, p. 14.) what is often not recognised is that a majority of this ‘urban population’, around 56% (CEC 2011, p. 1.) are actually to be found living in what are described as SMSTs. Thus, we produced the following table that illustrates the numbers and percentages of people living in different types of settlements based on our morphological classification. This clearly indicates the complex nature of Europe’s population distribution. For instance around 21% of Europe’s population live in small towns defined as places having populations between 5,000 and 50,000. What is also worth pointing out is that just over 16% of Europe’s population live in places with populations under 5,000.

Using this information, the map (from Servillo et al. 2014a, p. 9.) below illustrates the distribution of small towns across the European space. What is notable is that within an area that runs from the South East of England across the Benelux countries and West of Germany to Northern Italy there is a great number of such places what is often termed ‘The Pentagon’ that is traditionally associated with a concentration of urban and economic centres. So somewhat ironically it is also shown to contain the highest number and density of small towns in Europe. The map also identifies other concentrations in the industrial belt of South-Eastern Germany and Poland and along the length of the Western Mediterranean arc from Spain to Italy. What it also shows, relatively speaking, is the paucity of small towns in the interior of France, north-eastern Spain, the Alpine arc, and the eastern side of the Pentagon area. In many ways this should come as no surprise as these areas

have been losing population for a long period of time. Many of these latter, mainly rural areas, such as the French Massif Central, have experienced population decline over a lengthy period caused by high levels of out-migration, particularly of young people, and low levels of in-migration linked to long-term economic decline. Of course some of the decline in these areas has been accentuated by more recent changes linked to trends in the global, European, national and regional economy.

**Distribution of population between classes of cities/towns
according to TOWN typology 2, 2011**

Class	Delimitation criteria	Count	Average population	Average km ²	Average density	Total population in this class	As % of ESPON space*
HDUC	Population > 50,000 Population density > 1,500 inh./km ²	850	275,476.1	92.3	2,927.10	234,154,670	46.3
Large SMST	Population > 50,000 Population density < 1,500 inh./km ²	100	132,331.4	101.8	1,299.60	13,233,142	2.6
Medium SMST	25,000 < Population < 50,000 Population density > 300 inh./km ²	966	35,162.9	19.7	2,060.59	33,967,357	6.7
Small SMST	5,000 < Population < 25,000 Population density > 300 inh./km ²	7,348	10,241.5	7.6	1,470.09	75,254,510	14.9
VST	Population < 5,000 Population density > 300 inh./km ²	69,043	1,193.1	1.7	699.30	82,376,586	16.3

* Including EU27 + Iceland, Norway, Lichtenstein, Switzerland.

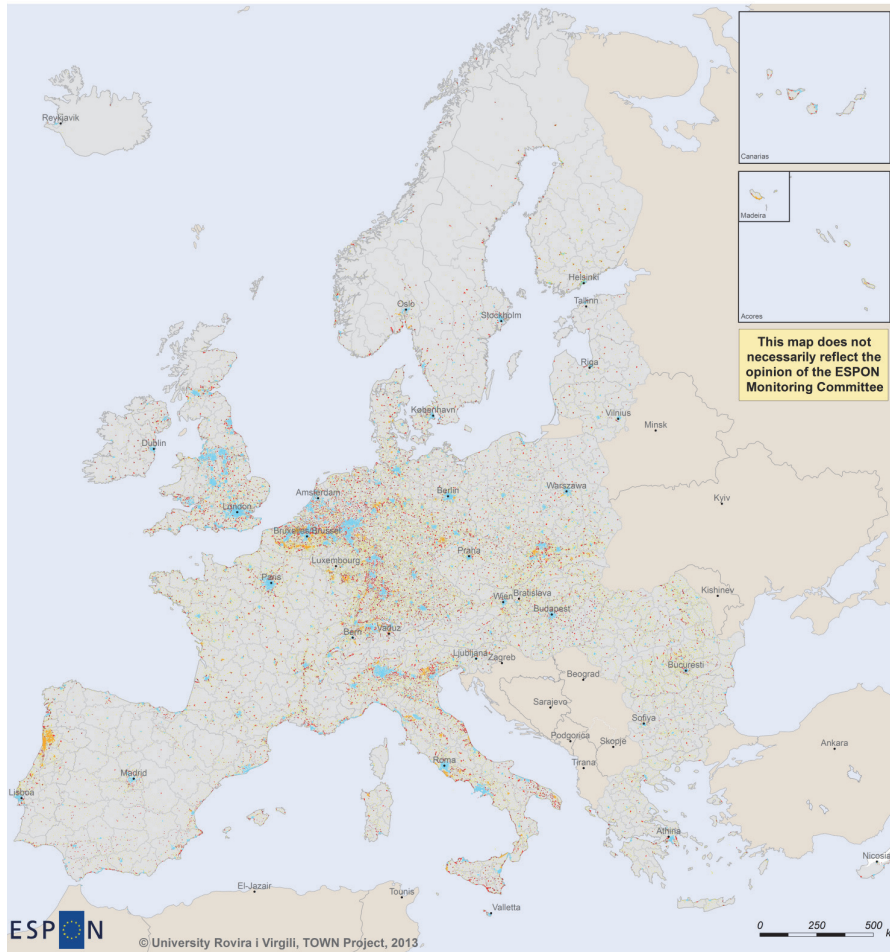
Note: Here and in the following figure, HDUC – high density urban clusters; SMST – small and medium-sized towns; VST – very small towns; inh. – inhabitants.

Source: Servillo et al. (2014a, p. 8).

What the map below does not tell us is anything about the functional role of these small towns. Nor does it tell us anything about how their regional location and how this influences them as the TOWN research indicates that regional location matters and is a significant, albeit not unqualified, determinant of their socio-

economic situation. This is precisely what the project sets out to investigate in a number (31) of carefully selected case studies in 10 countries across Europe.

Distribution of small towns across Europe based on TOWN typology 2



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POPULATION (inh.)	DENSITY (inh. / km ²)		
	< 300	> 300 and < 1500	> 1500
< 5000	OTHER SETTLEMENTS	VST (Very Small Towns)	
> 5000 and < 25000		Small SMT	
> 25000 < 50000		Medium SMT	
> 50000		large SMT	HDUC (high-density urban clusters)

NO DATA

Regional level: NUTS 3 and 1 km² grid cells
Source: Own elaboration on GEOSTAT data
Origin of data: DG Regio
Authors: F. Brandeja, A.P. Russo, D. Serrano Gimé
© EuroGeographics Association for administrative boundaries

Overseas territories not shown on map because of missing cover in GEOSTAT grid database

Small Towns and their context

One of the key findings of the TOWN project was that regional context matters, and along with national context, is an important determinant of the situation of small towns in terms of ‘where they are today’ and their ‘possible futures’, albeit not to the extent that it excludes the development of distinct locally driven responses and development (i.e. endogenous) to their situation. Given this it is therefore important to differentiate, at a general level, a ‘typology of regions’. Thus based on work carried out by the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Dijkstra–Ruiz 2010; Dijkstra–Poelman 2012; OECD 2010, 2012), we developed a three-fold regional typology that needs some internal differentiation:

1. Small towns in metropolitan regions, which can be subdivided into:
 - Thriving metropolitan regions
 - Declining metropolitan regions
2. Small towns in remote/rural or peripheral regions
3. Small towns in intermediate regions, which can be subdivided into:
 - Those close metropolitan/urban regions
 - Those close to rural/peripheral regions

The above regional context shapes the situation of small towns and may create both opportunities but also create problems for them and set limits on possible development trajectories. A few examples will serve to illustrate this.

So for instance while a small town in a thriving metropolitan region potentially has greater possibilities for development than those in declining metropolitan regions, their proximity to a successful metropolitan core can create new issues. This proximity may bring with it certain ‘risks’. If we take the case of a small town in the metropolitan region of Prague we see that in the agglomerated town Brandýs nad Labem – Stará Boleslav we find an example of the impacts of suburbanisation and decentralisation in metropolitan areas along with the offer of good services and a ‘high quality of life’. This small town experienced rapid population growth post-2000 after experiencing a long period of decline and stagnation. However, there are high levels of daily commuting to Prague related to having good transport links to the city. The problem is that the town is in danger of becoming a ‘dormitory town’, with many residents working, shopping and using leisure facilities in Prague. There has been a decline in the quality of private services in the city and of community life. A somewhat similar story is recounted by Kaufmann–Meili (2019) in their study of SMSTs in the Zurich metropolitan area. They found that “Our comparison reveals that the economic development and the economic specialization of SMSTs are largely exogenous to local policy-making.” (Kaufmann–Meili 2019, p. 36.). While not strictly comparable to the focus of this paper as they include medium-sized towns, their research revealed that the distance and connectivity to Zurich shaped their function and the type of development that took place in these towns, which is

similar to results in the TOWN Czech Republic case study (ESPON 2013a). Thus, those closer to and with good connectivity to Zurich were able to develop knowledge intensive business or financial service sector industries while those further away developed into residential towns. The only local factor able to influence local development was land-use policy. Overall, they described such places as 'like leaves in the wind' in terms of their ability to shape their own development trajectories. This illustrates how even 'successful' small towns in thriving metropolitan regions are not without their problems and that the function of a small town in its regional context shapes its development. In some cases, this means that such small towns have relatively limited opportunities to 'shape their own destinies'.

The Polish small town of Łosice located in a peripheral area of the Mazovia region close to the Polish-Belarusian border, provides an example of a small town in a 'peripheral rural area'. Its local economy is predominantly structured around agriculture, it has poor connectivity, an aging demographic structure related to the out-migration of young people, lacks large firms that could stabilise the labour market, suffers from a shortage of available jobs and unemployment. Its peripheral location and poor connectivity also means it is considered unattractive to outside investors. Moreover, its post-1989 development, economic structure and its location create significant problems for future development. This is exacerbated by the failure of local government to develop a coherent and strategic local development policy. The Polish TOWN case study (ESPON 2013d) described the approach as one of "...plugging holes« and sweeping problems under the carpet, handling difficulties as they arise." (p. 52.). The future development possibilities for the town appear to be restricted by its location, economic and demographic structure and lack of local capacity to react proactively and creatively to its problems and develop a long-term vision and strategy for its future development.

Nevertheless, one should not assume that all small towns in such locations/situations cannot succeed. The Cypriot small town of Athienou, a Cyprus TOWN case study (ESPON 2013b), provides a counter example. It is a small rural town located in a relatively remote area, has a long history and has a mainly agricultural based economy. Moreover, it is situated in the United Nations 'buffer zone' between North and South Cyprus created in the aftermath of the Turkish invasion of the island. This all means is that it has been further isolated due to the effects of the division of the island in 1974. Additionally, as a result of the division of the island it lost access to the main area from which its agricultural products (wheat and barley) were produced (the population lost access to 65% of their land). In addition, it also lost a direct connection with the capital of Cyprus (Nicosia) and thus found itself in a much more isolated position than prior to the invasion. All of this would suggest that the town faced a bleak future. However, despite a decline in population, employment growth has been surprisingly high. The TOWN Cypriot case (ESPON

2013b) study explained this by reference to the strong entrepreneurial spirit present in the town and its local 'milieu'. In part this comes from the local council's activities in relation to promoting and developing the cultural and social sector. Also it has a well-established cultural, social and athletic associations, a social welfare committee that runs relevant programmes and has built public home for the elderly. In addition, the town formed an agricultural cooperative to support its farmers as long ago as 1916. All of this emphasises a long history of cooperation and sharing within the population and along with the presence of a rich civic culture this constitutes a positive 'milieu'. So despite its problems the town has 'successfully reinvented itself' by developing its agricultural and agroindustry sectors based on livestock and cereal production. Most of the investment required to develop these sectors was locally generated and thus there is minimal dependence on outside investors. Moreover, the vast majority of employment (90%) created by these developments has been taken by local people, so the benefits of development have largely remained within the town.

The problem with success stories like this is that they are difficult to replicate because they are so deeply embedded in a rich historically created and maintained milieu. Although research on Danish small towns in rural areas (Fertner et al. 2015) suggests some small towns can resist decline by reinventing themselves through a process of what they term 'residential urbanism'. Taken together this does suggest that there are a number of pathways of development that small towns in rural/peripheral regions can take but much depends upon the presence of a rich and embedded civic culture, social capital and a spirit of cooperative endeavour that enables local people to create a viable future for the town.

The French small town of Vendôme is an example of a place in an intermediate region close to a major metropolitan region – Paris. It is located in a predominantly rural area and as the TOWN French case study (ESPON 2013c) notes traditionally the local economy was reliant on the agricultural sector but post-WWII, due to its relative proximity to Paris, manufacturing industry began to develop particularly as several multi-national companies decided to locate facilities there. However, later decisions by these companies to relocate created problems for the town. What really changed things for the town in the early 1990s was the construction of the TGV line between Paris and Bordeaux on which Vendôme was located. This now means that the town has a direct connection to Paris that takes around 40 minutes. As a result, many families have relocated from the Paris metropolitan region to the Vendôme area where they have access to cheaper housing and a rural location which offers a better quality of life. In addition, there is considerable daily commuting from the town to Paris. All of this creates dilemmas for the future development of the town. The municipality is uncertain over its future development – is it a 'suburb' of Paris or part of its parent region? In part this may be related to the influx of new-

comers who have relocated from the Paris region and who have no sense of identity with the town or the region. The danger is that in the future it will increasingly become a 'dormitory town' which has potential negative impacts on both the local economy and local society.

The above vignettes give a sense of how a range of factors such as regional location, connectivity and 'civil society' can influence a small town's development. While we have stated regional location is an important factor structuring potential avenues of development and associated opportunities, these vignettes also illustrate that both endogenous (e.g. a rich civic culture, tradition of cooperation) and exogenous (decisions about the routes of transport infrastructure, firms investment decisions) factors can present new opportunities for and threats to their future development. What they also suggest is that it is difficult to come up with overarching prescriptions for small towns even within a broadly similar regional context and that even small towns in apparently unpromising locations can be successful. In the next section we turn to the issue of what can potentially be done about the development of small towns.

Small Towns – what can we do – the place-based approach

Since the publication of the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion (CEC 2008), subtitled Turning territorial diversity into strength, and the Barca Report (Barca 2009) there has been an overwhelming emphasis on the endogenous development of places, with appropriate exogenous support, known as the 'place-based approach'.

It is important to note that within the EU the place-based approach sits within a wider framework created by EU Cohesion Policy that entails the articulation of spatial planning with the notion of territorial development and the place-based approach within the EU. This is related to the development of an approach known as territorial development. The wider policy context has constructed an overarching policy narrative that seeks to simultaneously accomplish 'polycentric development' in combination with 'territorial balance and harmonious development'. In effect, this means the achievement of territorial, economic and social cohesion across the European space (see CEC 2008, 2010; ESDP 1999). There are two essential problems here, first the relationship between territorial, economic and social cohesion remains unclear to say the least. Second, the hegemonic discourse within the EU is a version of neo-liberalism that is primarily concerned to develop Europe's competitiveness (see Olesen 2014) particularly in the current period of economic crisis and fiscal austerity that prevails across Europe. This means that inevitably there is an overwhelming emphasis on economic cohesion in the sense of seeking to improve the economic performance of places (cities and towns) across Europe.

The Barca Report (2009) which sets out and justifies a place-based approach argued that it should be aimed at what are referred to as 'meaningful places of inter-

vention' (i.e. not limited by administrative boundaries and borders; see Barca 2009, p. 93). Moreover, the areas selected for such interventions should have a coherent functional geography. This in turn raises issues/problems related to the development of effective working and coordination relations across administrative boundaries in order to overcome the dissonance between territorial focus and administrative entities. Something that has proved difficult in the past and still appears to be a serious obstacle to the development of a place-based approach in many parts of Europe. Nevertheless, it is important to note that a precondition for the successful development of a place-based approach, according to the Barca Report, is institutional change:

The intervention needed to tackle these problems should take the form of the provision of integrated bundles of public goods and services aimed at triggering institutional change, improving the well-being of people and the productivity of businesses and promoting innovation. The goods and services concerned need to be tailored to places by eliciting and aggregating local preferences and knowledge and by taking account of linkages with other places. (Barca 2009, p. 11.)

However, in many ways what the Green Paper and the Barca Report (Barca 2009) did was to rationalise and justify an approach that had already been evolving in many places around Europe where cities and towns had realised they needed to develop their endogenous potential (i.e. forms of territorial capital), address their weaknesses/problems and utilise external support from regional, national and, where available, European funding programmes. More forward looking places had also taken on the board the need to develop sustainable forms of economic development that reconciled competitiveness and social cohesion. Moreover, some also recognised the need that this should be accompanied by institutional change.

In the remainder of this section we will examine a few examples of 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' attempts at developing and implementing a place-based approach to small town development. This will help illustrate the dilemmas they face.

The Czech town of Písek offers an example of a town that has managed to overcome a potentially difficult situation and revive its fortunes. It is an 'isolated' small town in a peripheral rural area of southern Bohemia situated between three relatively distant large cities. This situation allows it to retain a degree of autonomy it perhaps would not otherwise have were it located within the 'zone of influence' of one of these cities.

The TOWN Czech Republic case study (ESPON 2013a) notes that at the beginning of the 1990s the town faced a number of economic challenges that raised questions over its future development. In addition to industry based on the machinery and electronics sectors, the main employer was the textile industry. However, in the post-socialist period when the national economy underwent a rapid transformation

towards a more market-based system the textile company was unable to compete under new market conditions. Moreover, the town was also an important army base which was downsized due to a reduction in the size of the army and relocation of the remaining troops. As a result of these developments, the town experienced high levels of unemployment.

Despite these problems Písek was able to develop into a town with a stable population, growing economy and low unemployment. One of the ways in which it did this was by being one of the first Czechs towns to create an industrial zone and attract investment from the automotive and electronic industries. In addition to these relatively labour intensive industries, it has sought to encourage the development/location of firms in the knowledge intensive sector by constructing a new technology park focused on ITC. It has also sought to develop tourism along with cultural festivals and other culture-related institutions such as museums, galleries, and other cultural and tourist-oriented facilities. It is also developing higher education facilities to support these developments. Thus, it has sought to develop a diverse economy.

The successful (re)development of Písek has been led by the municipality which sets ambitious development goals and was active in many fields. Moreover, the town attempted to balance support for business and competitiveness with support for social cohesion. It was able to do this by using both its own internal resources (e.g. land and other property transferred from the state in the early 1990s) and combining these with resources from national policies and programmes, participation in cross-border cooperation and the Structural Funds of the EU. This development process has been structured by a strategic plan first created in 2001 and updated regularly to address the town weaknesses. In addition, the town has attempted to create an 'entrepreneurial culture' to fuel future developments. Moreover, it works well with other municipalities in the sub-region and the national government and has the capacity to utilise EU resources in a targeted manner to support its strategic plan.

While the municipality has developed the town's economic competitiveness and position compared to other cities, it has also focussed on enhancing the quality of life of its citizens. It has done this by developing its social services and housing and improving education, public spaces and other facilities used by citizens. Thus, it has balanced external competitiveness and internal social cohesion and in this sense represents an example of good practice. Nevertheless, it has not been a continuous 'success story' as many of the new jobs created were for employees with lower qualifications rather than for those who has been university educated. Thus, it is now facing the loss of its elite, well-educated inhabitants, which may have implications for its future development.

The Italian small town of Alba, rather like the Cypriot town of Athienou referred to earlier, offers a positive example of how a place can create its own pathway of development based on the exploitation of its resources. The TOWN Italian case study (ESPON 2013f) points out that Alba is located in a hilly region of the Province of Piedmont, however, due to its 'poor connectivity' it is considered to be remote/isolated in terms of the rest of the region. Nevertheless, this does not seem to have affected its development. Despite this isolation it has developed its own unique (high quality) brand that has achieved a global presence. In particular, it has strengths in the agri-food sector and high quality tourism that is based on a mix of high quality local foods and wine (gastronomy), the high quality natural landscape, heritage and culture. They have been brought together into a coherent tourist offer aimed at high-value added tourism. In addition, it also has established several large scale manufacturing plants that serve a global market and a large number of small and medium-sized enterprises. In other words, it has a diverse economy that is strong and performing well. The town also has a well-educated workforce that has aided innovation in response to changing external circumstances and most of the benefits of development have been retained locally in the form of reinvest in the development of existing facilities and/or new opportunities and accrued to local people. Moreover, the Italian TOWN case study (ESPON 2013f) suggests that the local authority has not been the leading actor in these developments and that they have been driven by actors in the private sector and civil society. Rather like the example of Athienou, the 'local milieu' appears to have been the 'generative source' of development. To achieve this, it has built on well-established reciprocal local networks (e.g. social capital, 'knowledge exchange', and trust) and an associated strong sense of 'local identity' created over a long period of time, perhaps also a reflection of the 'isolated/remote' position it occupies.

However, the town's future is not without its potential problems. In terms of the manufacturing sector, the positive developments identified run the risk of 'delocalisation' as the relevant large-scale manufacturing firms consider relocating plants to other locations with access to cheaper labour, in response to global competition. The danger is that if this were to occur then the town would find itself reliant on tourism and the residential economy. Whether or not this is sufficient to sustain the local economy in the future is an open question. One final point should be made about both Alba and Athienou is that both represent 'outliers' in the TOWN research. In part this is because of the apparent lack of leadership by the public sector which stands in stark contrast to other small towns. In addition, it should be noted that both Alba and Athienou were 'outward looking' and sought to build and maintain links with other places. Finally, while such cases represent good examples of 'success stories', we need to bear in mind that it would be very difficult to replicate/transfer the factors that underlie their success (social relations, mix/articulation of territorial capital, and modes of 'mobilisation' of those assets) elsewhere because

they are ‘deeply embedded’ in the local social structure and reflect a very particular ‘history’.

These two towns are examples of how place-based approaches can be developed to address the problems small towns face. However, the majority of small towns in our TOWN research were unable to replicate the relatively successful development trajectory of these two towns. The Welsh small town of Tredegar represents an example of a former industrial small town that has been unable to prosper in the wake of the decline of its industrial economy. It is agglomerated within a wider sub-region dominated by larger cities (Cardiff and Newport), albeit it is located on the periphery of the south-east Welsh ‘capital region’. The town is located in the municipality of Blaenau Gwent which is the most deprived district in Wales. It is also located within the West Wales and the Valleys region which since 2000 has been in receipt of the highest rate of EU Structural Funds (Objective 1 and subsequent programmes). It has also been in receipt of funds from programmes launched by the Welsh government such as the Communities First initiative and UK national government programmes such as the Enterprise Zone policy.

The TOWN UK case study (ESPON 2013e) notes that Tredegar has a long industrial history and had ironworks from the early 1800s and it has long been associated with coal mining. However, it has experienced de-industrialisation over the past 30-40 years. One of the town’s current problems is that it has a high proportion of working age adults with either few or no qualifications, in 2011 just over 38% of working age adults in Tredegar had no qualifications. This doubtless contributes to the fact that in 2011 it had very low employment with only 51% of the working age population in some form of employment. This has made it very difficult for the town to adapt to a ‘post-industrial economy’.

While the Blaenau Gwent municipality has a number of initiatives to improve the situation of Tredegar and other similar towns in its area, these initiatives were not ‘joined-up’ and in effect there was no overall strategy to address the problems that Tredegar and other similar towns in the local authority area faced. In an attempt to address the problems, using EU Structural Funds, a major redevelopment has taken place on a former steel works site in the adjacent town of Ebbw Vale. The steel works closed in the early 1980s having once been a major employer in the area (in the 1960s it employed around 14,500 people and was a major source of employment for people from Tredegar). This site is now known as ‘The Works’, it includes a range of facilities including housing, a community centre, educational facilities, and a hospital. It is hoped that this will provide the sort of workforce that will attract new (high quality) investment and perhaps begin to address the identified lack of an entrepreneurial culture and attitudes to work prevalent not just in Tredegar but in the wider area. However, this will be a long-term process and it is likely to take at least a decade before any clear results emerge.

In the meantime, there is a hope that a tourist economy can be developed based on the area's industrial and social heritage. In addition, a great deal of emphasis was placed on the building of a racing circuit known as the 'Circuit of Wales' which would have had associated high-tech motor vehicle research and development facilities. It was hoped this would attract large numbers of tourists and provide employment for local people. However, the proposed investment was never forthcoming. Moreover, the area lacks an adequate tourist infrastructure to provide for large numbers of tourists meant it would have been difficult to cater for visitors and this same deficiency makes it difficult to support heritage-based tourism. What this illustrates is that the ambitious but unrealistic plans that many municipalities have for their development are difficult to realise without a clear 'vision', strategy and the 'capacity to act' by creating and deploying appropriate policies in an integrated and planned manner.

Across Europe, small former industrial towns such as Tredegar appear to have entered into a long-term 'spiral of decline'; experience suggests that it is extremely difficult to break out of such a spiral. What is also apparent in towns like Tredegar is the relative weakness of the private sector and that they lack organisations which can adequately formulate and articulate their interests. Moreover, they lack the sort of civic culture we identified earlier in places like Alba and Athienou that could initiate development. This means the onus lies with local government to take this process forward and in many, if not a majority of, small towns they lack the capacity to do this even with external support.

Conclusions

What we can say in general about the factors influencing the development/decline of small towns is that regional context matters but is not necessarily determinate. The regional context may set certain parameters but this does not mean that they are insurmountable obstacles. What needs to be in place is appropriate support from higher level (EU, national and regional) authorities. It is most certainly helpful if these higher level authorities recognise the need to support small towns and have explicit policies/programmes to do so, although from the European down to the regional level such explicit policies rarely exist. Nevertheless, there are resources available to small towns that they can draw on provided they can access and deploy those available at the different levels; this requires that towns have the ability to engage in what are often complex multi-level governance structures. However, this requires a proviso, there are not limitless funds available and they will need to be directed towards supporting the development of certain small towns. Thus, within a region it will be necessary to identify a 'settlement hierarchy' based on the functional roles of towns (e.g. related to employment, housing, the provision of public and private services and connectivity) and their ability to support daily life in surround-

ing places. Depending on regional location, the types of support will vary, thus for instance small towns in rural/peripheral regions will need different types/levels of support to those located in thriving metropolitan regions.

Assuming that the above framework exists much then depends on the ‘capacity to act’ of small towns. This requires them to develop appropriate institutional structures and processes to work across boundaries both internally (i.e. across traditional local government departmental divides) and externally (i.e. across administrative boundaries) to develop new forms of territorial governance. They will also need to find new ways to engage with local stakeholders from the private and civil society sectors to ensure they are fully engaged in decision-making and development processes. This will be required if the town is to develop a long-term ‘vision’ of what the town wants to become and its relationships with other places in the region/sub-region. However, any such ‘vision’ should be realistic, for instance not every place can aspire to be a centre of knowledge-based development. This will also entail the deployment of a spatial planning approach that is needed to realise this ‘vision’ by helping to identify the strengths (in terms of existing forms of territorial capital) and deficiencies that need to be addressed and developing a long-term strategy for the town that is supported by all stakeholders and can be revised in the light of experience. Following on, there will be a need to develop appropriate ‘policy bundles’, based on the short-, medium- and long-term goals of the town. Leadership is also essential but it is important that this does not rely upon a single individual or group of individuals. In some cases it may come from traditional political leaders but in other cases as the TOWN case studies illustrated it may arise from within civil society and take a more collective form.

As already noted not all small towns can be a focus for development and their will inevitably be ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. Moreover, some towns will simply find it impossible to break out of their deeply embedded path dependency. However, such places cannot simply be abandoned if notions of economic, social and territorial cohesion are taken seriously. These places will still require support to ensure daily life can continue, that residents have access to the necessary services (e.g. health, education, housing, employment), can experience the same quality of life as citizens living in more prosperous towns and have opportunities to achieve social mobility.

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