



City profile

Lyon City Profile



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ABSTRACT

Lyon is France's second city, located in south-eastern France at the confluence of the Saône and Rhône rivers. Historically, it was a significant European trade and financial centre during the 15th and 16th centuries, and from the 16th century, also became the largest producer of textiles in France, particularly associated with silk weaving. By the 19th century Lyon had become an important industrial city with a diversified base and associated tertiary activities. The 20th century saw the city expand further, particularly into its hinterland beyond the administrative boundaries. As a result, in relation to governance, there is a range of complex and multi-layered structures that characterise the city and the surrounding agglomeration. This profile documents these governance arrangements, and sets out some of the key challenges that the city faces today, including economic competitiveness, social cohesion and issues related to environmental sustainability. It shows that despite the city being a player on the European stage, with a number of high-profile urban development projects, including La Confluence regeneration area, there are still high levels of social polarisation in the city, with significant socio-spatial disparities between neighbourhoods. The challenge for Lyon is to make connections between high-profile development projects and disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the city, in order to address some of the key structural challenges that urban areas in many countries of the global north face in the 21st century.

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Introduction

Lyon is France's second city, with an important industrial legacy which is still very much in evidence today. However, it has traditionally been seen as playing second fiddle to the French capital of Paris, in relation to economic, political and cultural activity (Fig. 1). What this *City Profile* will illustrate is that Lyon has forged a certain independence from the dominant capital, founded on its strong economic base and expressed in the network of governance arrangements that have built up in the city region. These have led to a certain autonomy for the city, with Lyon finding its way on the international stage as a European partner city as well as a potential location for international investment in a number of high-profile urban development projects. However, as this *City Profile* will demonstrate, the presence of international capital investment and high-profile building projects does not necessarily impact on some of the most disadvantaged areas of the city, and Lyon is characterised, as are many other major cities in western Europe, by a number of significantly deprived neighbourhoods, demonstrating serious problems of economic and social exclusion.

Following this introduction, the subsequent section provides the geographic context for the development of the city, followed

by an outline of Lyon's historical development. The next section focuses on the particular issue of governance within the city, highlighting the *millefeuille* of governance layers that operate in the city region. With this governance context as background, the following section then explores the key challenges for the city, which are related to economic competitiveness, social polarisation and environmental sustainability. The penultimate section takes the example of a key urban development project in the city, La Confluence, and explores some of the issues that it raises in relation to sustainable urban development. The final section draws out some conclusions, highlighting the tensions that exist between high-profile urban development projects, and pressing socio-economic needs in other parts of the city.

Geographic context

The city of Lyon, created in Roman times as Lugdunum, capital of Gaul, is situated strategically in the infrastructure network that connects the north of Europe to the South. It is situated in the south-eastern part of France, at the confluence of the rivers Saône and Rhône (see Fig. 2). The historical crossroads formed by the transport axes of these two rivers is a key element for understanding the emergence and the evolution of the city of Lyon. The Rhône connects the city of Lyon southwards to Marseille and the Mediterranean, whereas the Saône continues this axis further north

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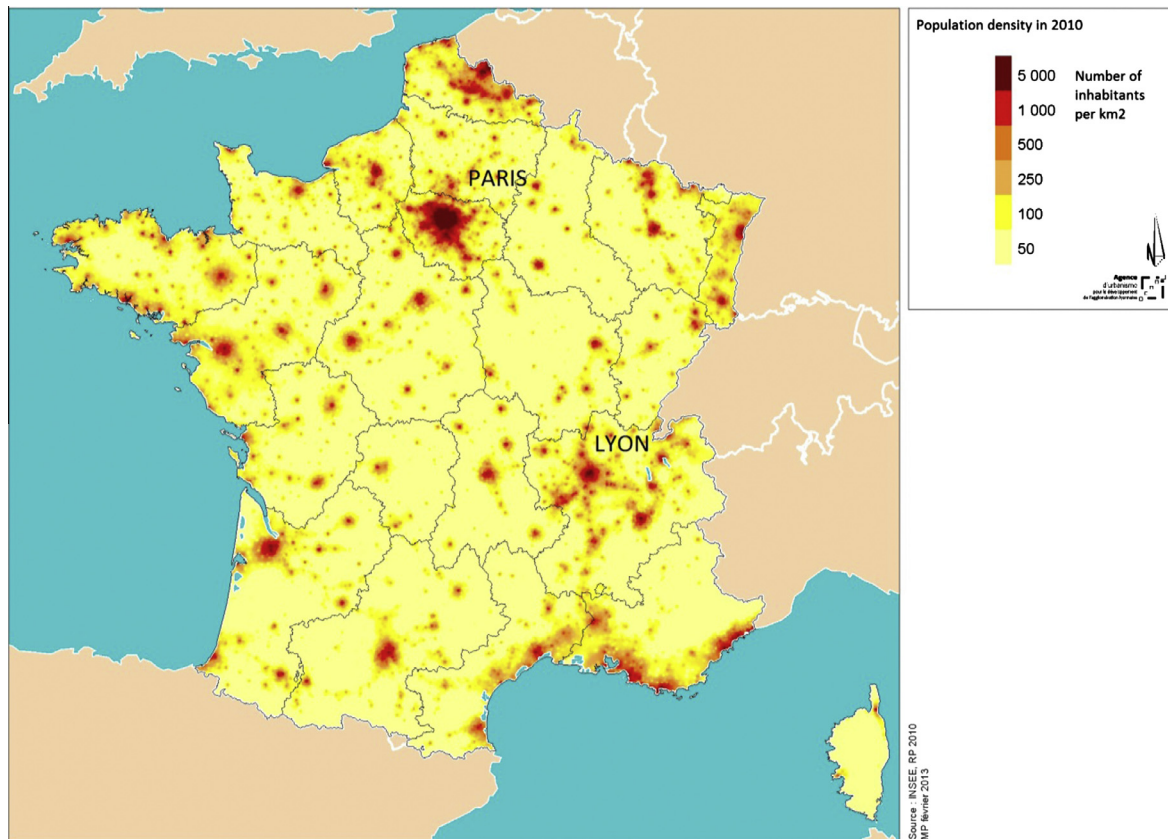


Fig. 1. Population density in France, showing the position of Lyon and Paris. Source: Agence d'Urbanisme de Lyon.



Fig. 2. An aerial view of Lyon showing the two rivers of the Rhône and Saône running from left to right, converging at La Confluence. Source: J. Léone/Grand Lyon.

towards the Seine and the Rhine basins. Together historically, they form a crucial part of the link between the Mediterranean and the North Sea. To the east, the city is a starting point for several roads crossing the Alps towards Switzerland and the north of Italy. As a result, since Roman times, Lyon has been a staging post on the journey between the North and the South of France, and for Europe. At various points in history, the Rhône has been a boundary, between the Kingdom of France and the German empire and between the *Lyonnais* and the *Dauphiné*. As a result, the city of Lyon has always been in contact with different regions, which adds to its history as a European crossroads.

The site of the city of Lyon itself is strongly characterised by the confluence of the two rivers, and the alternation between hills and

plains that come with it. The city developed originally on the western banks of the Saône river, where the edge of the Massif Central provided higher, dry land for urban development. Until the renaissance, the heart of the city was situated on the banks of the Saône and the hills surrounding it (Fig. 3). The Rhône river was much more difficult to cross because of its strong currents. Until the end of the 18th century, the course of the Rhône was not stabilised and shifted due to flooding. Much of the low lying river plains between the two rivers and to the east of the Rhône were wetlands that were unsuitable for urban development without proper draining and consolidation. As a result, urban development on the banks of the Rhône occurred later, and significant urban development on the east bank of the Rhône did not take place until the end of the 18th century. But from that moment onwards, the easterly extension of the city became more and more important as the flat river plains were more suitable than the hilly western part of the city for the development of the modern, industrial city (see Fig. 4).

Historical development

As Bonneville (1997) argues, since its creation in 49 BC during the Roman Empire, the city of Lyon has been marked by alternating periods, where for a time international connections have been important structuring elements for the city's development, and periods where regional exchanges have dominated. Important as capital of Gaul in the Roman period, the city combined administrative, commercial and political roles. During the Middle Ages, the city lost a part of its importance, although during the 12th and 13th centuries, it became an international Catholic capital, even hosting some Popes that had left Rome at the time. But the real revival of the city's dynamics began during the Renaissance, in the 15th and 16th centuries, when Italian bankers came to settle in

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