



Framing urban habitats: The small and medium towns in the peripheries



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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes an integrative vision of the role of small and medium towns in the developing world. A conceptual framework is explored on the role of sustainable regions and the effects as well as the causalities of urbanisation within the changing dynamics of cities. The new urban habitats that are formed bring not only a direct impact of population pressures on fragile regions, but this new urban habitats, lead to classical economic models that extend into patterns where developing countries can be main actors in the trends of regional innovation dynamics.

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Introduction

In presence of significant studies justifying the advantages of large cities for global growth (Kourtit & Nijkamp, 2013) it is not easy to scientifically demonstrate the role of medium and, mostly, small towns as elementary vehicles of balanced prosperity and development. There are no doubts that agglomeration economies provide profitable substance for the firms' location, thereby attracting investment, knowledge and innovation. Suitable management of scale economies and social risks that result from high population densities also support considering the model of large cities as efficient instruments for a better use of natural resources and human skills.

But within a more holistic and dynamic perspective, a long term understanding should be addressed. The reason is that as very large cities such as Tokyo (32,450,000), Seoul (20,550,000), Mexico City (20,450,000), New York City (19,750,000), and Mumbai (19,200,000) keep growing, other, in particular very small sized towns, keep shrinking across the world. As such towns depopulate and vanish from the maps, history is penalized and the future cultural diversity restricted. Thus, incorporating past endowments and future prospects should become a social requirement for sustainable development.

While observing cultural diversity disappearing one may question if, indeed, world economic welfare imposes this dual model

with an aggravating tendency or, rather, a more holistic view of the future may raise other insights in a context of equitable and inclusive conditions for all kinds of social agglomerations.

Currently, there is a significant lack of a solid theoretical framing to incorporate an almost hidden trend defined by all those citizens – and, there are many of them, who prefer small to large, simple to complex, or quiet to challenging. This paper's focus on the search for valid arguments in favor of the major role of SMT (small and medium towns) is society.

Firstly, we shall deal with a circumstance frequently forgotten in the literature review: Reasons for the increasing concentration of economic activities vary and their consequences differ, depending on the level of national wealth and income distribution of countries in which cities or towns locate. This national context is not a minor factor in the development process and it is a critical error to assume that agglomeration and scale economies exclusively determine growth in urban spaces (Vaz, Caetano, Nijkamp, & Painho, 2012). In most of the mega cities across the world the rural–urban mobility, resulting from a declining agricultural sector and other manufacturing industries justifies most of cities astonishing population increases (Vaz, Noronha, & Nijkamp, 2014). But, in fact, behind such occurrences, those dense urban spaces concentrate significant amount of unskilled labor, high rates of unemployment and many different parallel activities that help citizens to survive but do not contribute to the economic welfare. If on the one side, the exploding world economic structural change tends to reflect a terciarization process calling for new skills, on the other side, those activities such as knowledge intensive services, specialised business or innovative entrepreneurship, that could also be flourishing,

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do not match with the increasing amounts of accumulating unskilled labor.

Accordingly, it is not surprising that the dynamics of mega cities is promising in the case of prosperous economies as they are able to manage and control all the possible risks of exclusion. These rich urban centers have instruments to reduce, as much as possible, risks of exclusion, in a permanent effort to provide the population with updated formation that meets the economic needs of a fast growing city. This done at low prices for the labor market creates a generous opportunity for prosperity in megacities of richer counties.

However, whenever mega cities locate in poor or peripheral countries within a context for few opportunities to overcome the undesired consequences of large scale, the previous sequence does not occur. In these cases, diseconomies and negative externalities risk to reach a social unmanageable dimension of population, intensifying chaotic unorganized sprawl with huge perverse environmental impacts and increase in energy and social costs (Vaz, 2014). To treat such divergent evidences from a unique theoretical perspective is a wrong approach. A more complete comprehension of all the involved aspects is necessary.

Further, and observing the phenomena from a less global perspective, we should emphasize the fact that even though cities such as London, New York, Toronto, Singapore or São Paulo are important drivers of the global economy and implanted in healthy or emerging economies, not all the companies and families that populate them consider their location as positive signs for their lives and wellbeing. There is a large consensus on the unique opportunities related to employment, schooling and culture in such environments but, frequently, those are the only three major factors of attraction to big cities to be pointed out. If countless citizens consider large cities as exciting and stimulating places, many others dislike their noise, congestion, long commutes, high housing costs, and hectic life. This last group would push into alternative directions such as small cities or towns, in an environment they could feel friendlier, less hectic, with lower housing costs or with more outdoor activities would they have employment opportunities in different locations. As analysts we should not neglect those ecological pointers tending to characterize a modern trend of healthy life, environmental quality in connection with local identity within the concepts of life quality in medium and small towns.

Secondly, the dichotomy of urban versus rural areas is increasingly losing its relevance. Urban lifestyles, industrial high-tech development, advanced service production, access to higher education, use of modern ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) facilities, can all be also found in rural areas (Noronha Vaz, Leeuwen, & Nijkamp, 2006) favoring inspiring pioneer visions for peripheries and new prospects for their rural small and medium size towns. The upcoming generalized use of new ICT by companies, in particular, may drastically change the concept of distance and the locational choice of business (Vaz, 2013). At present a clear concept of proximity and distance is still missing as we are not clearly aware of the way how home office, e-learning and distance chatting may confuse all our classic notions of costs and benefits. Companies producing services will be able to save significant amounts of fix and variable costs if able to incorporate new e-tools into their daily functioning. Such actions may have an impact on companies' locational choice that, if away from the core, will be able to reduce rental or property costs, also pushing down the value of urban investments altogether.

In our opinion, considering technological change as a motor of an important revolution in the concepts of time and distance, there is not clear evidence to assume that the future urbanization tends necessarily to large cities. SMT should be aware of this fact and keep hope, working to be extremely attractive to better survive in a world of change and this is way the primary goal of this study is to

provide a new theoretic base for new opportunities for SMT (Noronha Vaz & Nijkamp, 2013).

Functions and networking systems for small and medium-sized towns

Urbanity is a historic phenomenon with roots in our most remote past, taking place to ease human kind survival to external aggressions. Across the world, there has been a multiplicity of different kind of settlements, some originating different urban forms, other not. One might ask which conditions determined settlements to become more urban than others and why some urban areas lasted for thousands of years while other disappeared with time; Possibly, in most the cases, settlements required continuous conditions for population growth which were not always provided in times of change. Also, it is known that trade and manufacturing created the best conditions for population to settle, in general in small and medium-sized communities, growing later into recognized as municipal towns with rights and duties.

Today, urban agglomerates of different dimensions spray over extended landscapes, mostly rural areas in a not uniform or homogeneous way. Not only their socio-economic, cultural, ecological and physical–geographical profiles differ, but they also diversify in settlement patterns. For example, even the small towns spread over the rural landscape, accomplish different functions as key carriers or poles of socio-economic, cultural and political activities. They are part of an organized structure which assure for cultural diversity, residential aptitude, distribution of goods and services, mobility and support of natural resources.

Central place theory and centrality, as a concept, still is the basic reference to elucidate networks of cities and town, also SMT. Centrality may be considered as: i) a set of functions taking place from the center to its peripheral surroundings; ii) a location more or less distant to most of the consumers.

Zipf's phenomenological law helps to identify the most important functions of SMT, delimiting them with their hinterlands and suggesting a social accounting matrix (SAM) to investigate possible intra- and interregional flows in a design of how the structure of a local economy interacts. Other, even more accurate methods, may trace the areas of influence of SMT such as spatial convergence–divergence analysis, gradient analysis, and wave interference analysis (Chojnicki, 1999, 2001).

Ratajczak (1999) explores all these methods to explain how towns' growth forces complementarities and towns with high population potentials may be surrounded by divergent areas as much as towns with low potentials by convergent ones. Figs. 1 and 2, below, demonstrate the combination of such forces.

In his explanation based upon the wave interference theory (WIT) outlined by Arida (2002), in a quantum theory context, Ratajczak, 2013, illustrates the mechanism where the most significant role is played by an urban–rural complementary duality. According to Arida (2002: 212), 'in the quantum metaphor every element is a duality and part of a higher order duality, which is qualitatively and quantitatively different from its two complementary aspects.' both figures represent interferences: either in hinterlands where the propagation of waves from their central places are stopped by sharp boundaries of whatever nature (social, economic, cultural, etc.) or in towns where an overlap of the waves are taking place.

A different approach to this same issue concerns the nature of functions taking place within an SMT, and here many aspects can be emphasized. Most of them show that SMT are deeply connected to local economies. According to Courtney and Errington (2000), Courtney, Lepicier, and Schmitt (2005), Courtney, Mayfield, Tranter, Jones, and Errington (2007), retail trade and personal

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