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The paradoxical place of small towns in sustainable development policies. What is beyond the images of “places where the living is easy”?

Abstract

Sustainable development policies have become new objectives of local actions since the implementation of the notion in the 1990s. Small towns promote images of places where the living is easy and with sustainable amenities like “natural” living environment. But, beyond these perceptions, operational sustainable development policies are quite occasional. Taking a sample of French small towns in the Auvergne region as examples, it is interesting to analyse this paradox of an interesting potential leading to rare effective actions. It seems that it is quite difficult for local stakeholders to implement really transversal and not sectoral policies and the lack of capacity and budget is an important issue for them as it takes time and money to develop really participative and holistic programs.

Key words: development; images; policies; small towns; sustainable

Over the years the concept of sustainable development has led to various definitions, understandings and instrumentations. Basic definition of sustainable development implies interrelation of three dimensions – environment, economy and society, meaning that each of them is as important as the others. Sustainable development became a political objective of the United Nations with several important summits and the Rio Conference in 1992. Some of the key sustainable development policy frameworks include comprehensive action plan Agenda 21 (created in 1992 and reaffirmed in 2002). Sustainable development remains a powerful concept and has been used extensively in town development since 1994 when several European capital cities signed the “Aalborg Commitments”. These commitments became the foundation of sustainable development planning in cities. Municipalities that signed these Commitments vowed to establish principles of effective governance, protection and preservation of natural resources, wellbeing and health of citizens. Nowadays the issue of quality of life tends to be more and more important for the attractiveness of spaces in a context of increasing commuting and social demand for a good living environment.

Small towns are often described as places where “the living is easy” or “human sized towns” and local actors tend to underline local amenities such as a good

environment, proximity to nature or strong social ties to attract newcomers, tourists, even new investors (Knox, Mayer, 2009). Furthermore, in the sustainable development philosophy, the notion of “think global, act local” tends to favour local actions and thus small localities where such experimentations can take place. But what is beyond the promotion of fashionable criteria and whether small towns can really implement sustainable development policies, not only focusing on environmental aspects but associating environment, economy, social and cultural issues?

Taking French small towns as case studies, the paper is questioning the implementation of real and concrete policies and programs such as Local Agenda 21 or Healthy City affiliations in such towns. Apart from national data, a survey has been conducted in a sample of 12 small towns in the Auvergne Region (interviews with local authorities and inhabitants). This sample has been chosen to represent a range of situations (demographic and economic trends, geographical distance from large cities). It appears to be quite difficult (politically and financially) to plan “green and soft” transports modes, encourage local food systems or design eco-neighbourhoods, when local budgets are often limited and economies of scales not always possible. Finally, the place of small towns in sustainable development policies is quite paradoxical as few of them are really involved in sustainable development programs despite their images of places “where the living is easy”.

Small towns: are they places “where the living is easy”?

In France, small towns are often portrayed in iconic terms as “towns in the countryside”, close to nature. They are generally seen as more sustainable places to live in because of the absence of congesting forces, such as traffic, pollution and crime. Reduced transportation costs in terms of fuel and time along with higher division of labour are regarded as main advantages of small and medium towns.

In city branding, environmental, social and heritage aspects are very much used in the promotion of small towns (Tab. 1). a study of Internet sites of a sample of more than 80 small towns shows that the living environment (described as “natural” and “preserved”) and quality of life attributes are quoted more often than economic aspects (Mainet, 2011).

Tab. 1. Examples of images and words used to describe small towns amenities

Words and notions used		Number	%
Total sample		83	100
Of which:	Living environment (« natural » and « preserved »)	20	24.1
	Quality of life	17	20.5
	History, heritage	15	18.1
	Dynamism of local economy	11	13.3

Sources: analysis of a selection of French small town websites (2010)

Those good images and the importance of environmental aspects are also noticeable in images and perceptions of inhabitants (Tab. 2). a survey conducted in Auvergne small towns, on a sample of 328 dwellers, shows that the evaluation of their quality of life is good and very good, largely linked with the characteristics of the place and prized amenities, like the living environment qualities. Social aspects are also important and outdistance economic features like the existence of job opportunities or the proximity to work. Considering the three sustainable development pillars, economy seems to be less important in residential choices and mobility.

Tab. 2. Perceptions of quality of life by small towns' inhabitants

A- Evaluation of quality of life	Percentage
Excellent	49.0
Good	43.2
Rather good	4.2
Bad	1.2
B- Components of quality of life	Quotations rank
Place amenities (quietness, living environment...)	1
Personal aspects (family life, well-being...)	2
Social aspects (neighbourhood, sense of security...)	3
Job / proximity to work	4

Sources: author's survey, 2012–2013

But the reality is often quite divergent from mainstream images. Like other communities, small towns are facing myriad of challenges, ranging from job and population losses in many places to development pressures and changing landscapes in others. Access to jobs, services, and transportation options can be often limited. Is the living still easy when public services are closing (this is the case in many of French small towns, where courts and tribunals, police stations, post offices, hospitals are affected by the national policy of restructuring public services), when jobs in industries are reduced and young people are leaving? Ageing in lots of small towns is also a real issue. The promoted quality of life seems to be more ambiguous than it might appear. In that context, what is the place of local policies specifically dedicated to the improvement of quality of life issues and, more generally speaking, of sustainable development?

A difficult commitment in operational sustainable development policies

An interesting paradox is the difference between the will and the capacity of local stakeholders to implement sustainable development policies. Different schemes and frameworks exist to develop sustainable development policies (climate and energy plan, environmental charter...). The analysis of different transversal and holistic programs proves that the place of small towns is not obvious. It seems that implementing official sustainable development policies is quite difficult for small towns, compared to other towns, especially large and medium sized towns.

The first example is the Local Agenda 21. It has been created as a local adaptation of the Rio 1992 precepts (Dooris, 1999). In France, the national policy aims at encouraging communes and local authorities to adopt a Local Agenda 21 through a national process of branding (which has to be revaluated regularly). In 2013, 470 Local Agendas 21 were certified by the State, when 950 others were implemented without official recognition. Looking at the total of the French Local Agendas 21, it is interesting to notice that small towns (with population between 2,000 and 20,000 inhabitants) are hardly represented (Tab. 3).

Tab. 3. French communes with Local Agenda 21 and Healthy City membership by size

Size of communes (number of inhabitants)	Share of local authorities with Local Agenda 21 by the type of communes %	Share of Healthy City members by the type of communes %	Share of urban units in the category in the national total %
Less than 2,000	0.1	x	x
2,000 – 20,000	1.6	13.5	89.0
20,000 – 100,000	17.0	51.8	9.4
Over 100,000	57.0	34.7	1.6

Source: a national survey (<http://encyclopedie-dd.org/encyclopedie/economie/4-3-territoires-et-amenagement/les-agendas-21-locaux-et-les.html>) and <http://www.villes-sante.com/>

Another program was the adoption of Healthy City measures. This program has been launched in 1986 with the Ottawa Charter by the World Health Organization. The objectives are to promote services and programs dedicated at a healthy living environment, taking into account social and spatial factors. Elements of sustainable development are very important in the Ottawa Charter and the local scale is chosen as the best one to develop actions through a “local health plan” (Le Goff, Séchet, 2011). In France, in 2013, 86 communes are Healthy Cities members, but only 13.5% of them are small towns (when they represent 89% of the total urban units). Medium sized towns authorities are more involved in this program¹.

Looking at the sample of Auvergne small towns, it is interesting to identify how and why local actors have been implementing or not sustainable development programs. From 12 small towns, five have already entered operational actions (Tab. 4). It is worth to notice that they are part of collaborative plans with surrounding communes. Only six of them have the clear mention of sustainable development in the structure of their municipal commissions. But sustainable development is seldom considered a transversal commission, often associated with sectoral and quite different authorities (like housing, environment, planning). It seems that the definition of sustainable development, which, in theory, is supposed to associate environment, economy and society, is quite blurred.

¹ As comparison, in Poland, with 43 Healthy Cities in 2013, 23% are small towns, 53.4% the medium ones and 23.6% large cities.

Tab. 4. Place of sustainable development (SD) policies in municipal organization of Auvergne small towns (ranked according to the importance of SD)

Small Town	SD program	Existence of SD commission in the commune structure
Cournon	Territorial Climate plan (with Clermont-Ferrand metropolitan area)	SD and local planning
Brioude	With the community of communes	Urbanism, housing and SD
Issoire	With the community of communes	« Living together » and SD
Ambert	With the community of communes	–
Saint-Flour	With the community of communes	–
Commentry	A21 planned	Works, urbanism, housing and SD
Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule	A21 planned	Education, citizenship, ecology, SD and environment
Thiers	–	Water, sanitation, transports, SD and works
Yssingeaux	–	–
Vic-le-Comte	–	–
Billom	–	–
Lapalisse	–	–

Source: survey, 2012–2013

The reasons to implement sustainable development policies are linked with the promotion of the town and the recognition of policies already implemented as a way to formalize them. It is also important to take advantage of being a part of a network and sharing experiences and “good practices”.

The reasons “why not” are very interesting to understand from the small town actors’ point of view. Small cities are at a distinct disadvantage when trying to enact sustainability policies due to capacity (staff time and skills, local revenue). They often have limited local government service delivery and planning capacity. In many small places the limiting factor in terms of any policymaking, including sustainability programs, is often capacity. Professional management (both in the form of a city/town manager and the specific dedication of staff time to sustainability) increased the adoption of sustainability policies. It can be an explanation of the “better” position of medium sized towns.

Furthermore, small towns depend more on citizen or political leadership. The role of local leaders is very important in the decision to apply for membership of these programs. The role of citizens is also important in small towns, and local governments that created an official citizen commission to oversee sustainability actions seem to adopted more policies. The example of Issoire is typical, “with Group 21” dealing with inhabitants and actors dialogues and “walking workshops” aiming at in situ observations of local issues.

Small towns need structures to provide technical assistance and support (at regional or national levels). For example in Auvergne, an eco-development network of small and medium towns has been created in 2013, with the support of the State for funding and engineering. Another example is the national program for eco-districts. In 2011, of a total of 394 applications submitted, 27% came from small towns (and rather the same was the share of the rural communes), that is from communes in need for funding and support.

Conclusion

Finally, the place of small towns in sustainable development policies is quite paradoxical as few of them are really involved in operational and global programs. We observe a paradox between their images of sustainable places and the fact that most of them do not (and cannot) implement sustainable development policies. Another issue is the importance of collaborative schemes, with neighbouring communes or with regional or national partners.

The diversity of small towns should be taken into account as the possibilities are different depending on demographic and economic trends (the issue of declining economy and depopulation). Their location from greater urban centres is also a major spatial aspect as small towns integrated in metropolitan areas are facing different problems and have different opportunities than more the remote ones, assuming a role of local centres for rural surroundings.

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