MID-SIZED CITIES IN FRANCE: VULNERABILITY, POTENTIAL AND TERRITORIAL CONFIGURATIONS

Mid-sized cities have long been regarded as fundamental building blocks in the French urban framework, playing a part in national cohesion. The work conducted by the General Commission for Territorial Equality (CGET) confirms that they carry out their centrality roles by accommodating activities and employment, health facilities and educational institutions, sports and cultural amenities and heritage sites for example. These cities are also links, connecting different territories together. But they do not form a uniform whole for all that - not by a long way. Some present solid trajectories, others are more vulnerable. Mid-sized cities also reveal a diversity of geographic situations and territorial configurations which influence their development in different ways.

A STRONG CONNECTING FEATURE OF FRENCH TERRITORY

In turn trading posts or religious stopovers, prefectures or subprefectures and participants in the post-war boom years, mid-sized cities criss-cross French territory in an interlinking network. At European level, through the "Town" project initiated in 2013, ESPON[1] has recognised the role that Europe's small and medium-sized towns play in the day-to-day lives of citizens and businesses alike[2]. 46.3% of the population considered by this study lived in the largest cities, 6.7% in mid-sized cities and 14.9% in small towns. In its study on territorial development in Europe towards 2050, published in 2015, ESPON points out, incidentally, that, of the three scenarios considered, the two based particularly on mid-sized cities enable the relative development disparity gaps between European regions to be reduced, all the while ensuring similar average growth.

[1] European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion. ESPON was set up by the European spatial planning ministers back in the 1990s as a research network aimed at monitoring European Union territory.

[2] ESPON. Town: small and medium sized towns in their functional territorial context. Final report. November 2014, read about the study at https://www.espon.eu/programme/projects/espon-2013/applied-research/town-%E2%80%93-small-and-medium-sized-towns.

In 2013, around 15.6 million people lived in France's 203 mid-sized cities, which is almost 23% of the population. Three-quarters of them are located in urban areas which had seen their populations grow between 2008 and 2013. Over the same period, the population of most central municipalities (62%) fell in comparison. It should be noted that these figures cover very diverse situations, however. Mid-sized cities, whose central municipality and urban area are experiencing demographic growth, are greater in number than those whose central municipality is declining and urban area growing.

		Number of mid-sized cities	Proportion of mid-sized cities	Examples of cities
Central municipality on the rise	Urban area on the rise	71	35%	Draguignan Lannion
	Stable urban area	2	1%	Haguenau Saint-Paul
	Declining urban area	2	1%	Forbach Sallanches
Stable central municipality	Urban area on the rise	2	1%	Beaucaire Mulhouse
Declining central municipality	Urban area on the rise	65	32%	Bastia Saint-Omer
	Stable urban area	10	5%	Vendôme Soissons
	Declining urban area	51	25%	Bar-le-Duc Morlaix

DEFINING MID-SIZED CITIES

The CGET has adopted a definition taken from a statistical cross-linking exercise, based on the following criteria:
- urban units[6] with more than 20,000 inhabitants (2013 population);
- of the "large urban centre" type according to Insee's urban area delimitation[7];
- not included in one of the 22 urban areas encompassing the institutional metropolises[8].

These three conditions enable cross-linking of the two main factors underpinning the notion of mid-sized city: size and centrality roles.

In the six départements that do not have an urban area with more than 20,000 residents, those urban units whose central municipality is the département's capital have been considered.

In this way we end up with 203 mid-sized cities, including 191 in Mainland France and 12 in the French Overseas Régions and Départements.

Mid-sized cities are still carrying out centrality roles. Accordingly, they are home to a quarter of jobs, a third of health facilities, a quarter of higher secondary schools, a quarter of student numbers and provide over 80% of the residents of their living territories[3], with access to 12 mid-range facilities in 15 minutes or less[4].

WEAK FACTORS IN SOME MID-SIZED CITIES
THE RISKS OF INDUSTRIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE SPECIALISATION

As is the case France-wide, the main activity sectors of mid-sized cities concern trade, transport and miscellaneous services, then public administration, education, health and social action. That said, in almost half of mid-sized cities, the proportion of industrial establishments exceeds the national average (5.3% in France). This over-representation shows that a large number of mid-sized cities, which went down the industrial road from the late 19th century or during the industrial decentralisation of the 1960s, have maintained sector-specific specialisation. This characteristic has been highlighted as a weakness by several authors[5] who believe that these industrial establishments are positioned on low value-added activity sectors.

PENSIONERS BUT FEW EXECUTIVES

Analysis of the population aged 15 years and over, according to socio-professional categories, reveals two features specific to mid-sized cities: a high proportion of pensioners and lower proportion of executives and higher intellectual professions (29.4% and 6.2% respectively versus 26.6% and 9% in France, in 2013). The proportion of pensioners accounts for more than a third of the population in nearly a third of mid-sized cities, most of which are located in coastal areas (Berck, Dinan, Fréjus, Granville, Lannion, Les Sables d'Olonne, Royan, Saint-Malo, Sète) or the centre of France (Châtellerault, Vendôme, Vierzon, Montluçon, Le Creusot, Montceau-les-Mines, Roanne,

[3] Delimitation of living territories divides up living zones with over 50,000 inhabitants around service centres to take better account of the diversity of quality of life within the most urbanised territories. As such, there are 2,677 living territories in mainland France, with living zones of fewer than 50,000 inhabitants having retained this designation.

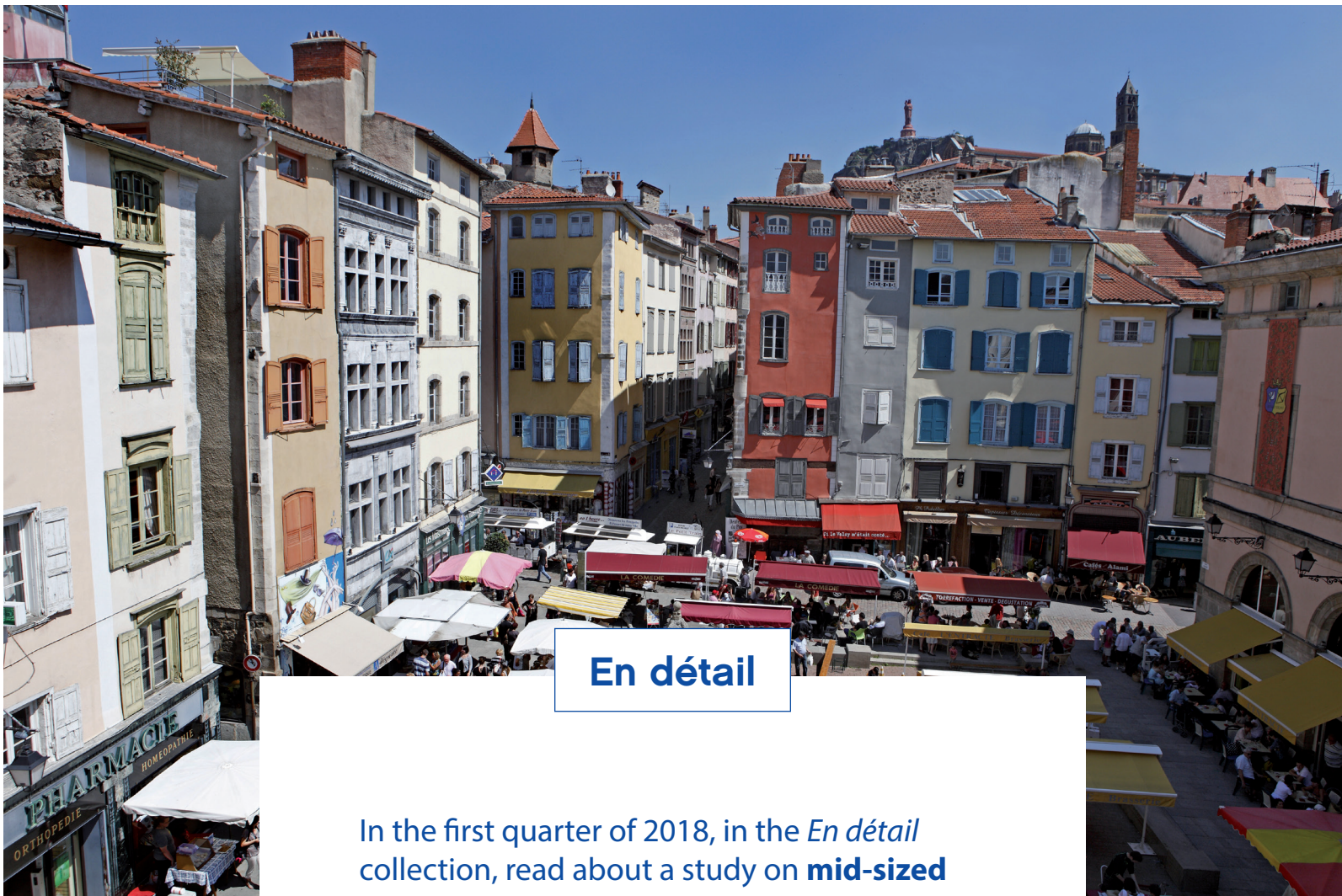[4] This statistic is not available for Mamoudzou (Mayotte).

[5] Acadie. Les villes moyennes, enjeux d'action publique. Study carried out for the Delegation for Territorial Planning and Regional Action (Datar). 2005.

[6] An urban unit is a municipality or group of municipalities presenting a continuous built area (no interruption of more than 200m between two buildings) and with at least 2,000 inhabitants.

[7] A "large urban area" is a group of touching municipalities, without pockets of clear land, encompassing an "urban centre" (urban unit) providing at least 10,000 jobs, and a periurban periphery composed of rural municipalities or urban units in which at least 40% of the employed resident population works in the centre or in the municipalities attracted by this centre.

[8] 22 urban areas whose centre is a metropolis in the institutional meaning of the term (perimeters on 1 January 2017, General Directorate for Local Authorities/DGCL), i.e. 18 metropolises and 4 urban communities or urban area communities in the process of becoming a metropolis, whilst retaining the same municipal compositions.

En détail

In the first quarter of 2018, in the *En détail* collection, read about a study on **mid-sized cities**.

This publication gives a **comparative insight** into the **CGET's expertise** and the studies by **young scientists** across a range of subject areas which are helping to **shed light on the challenges** of spatial planning.
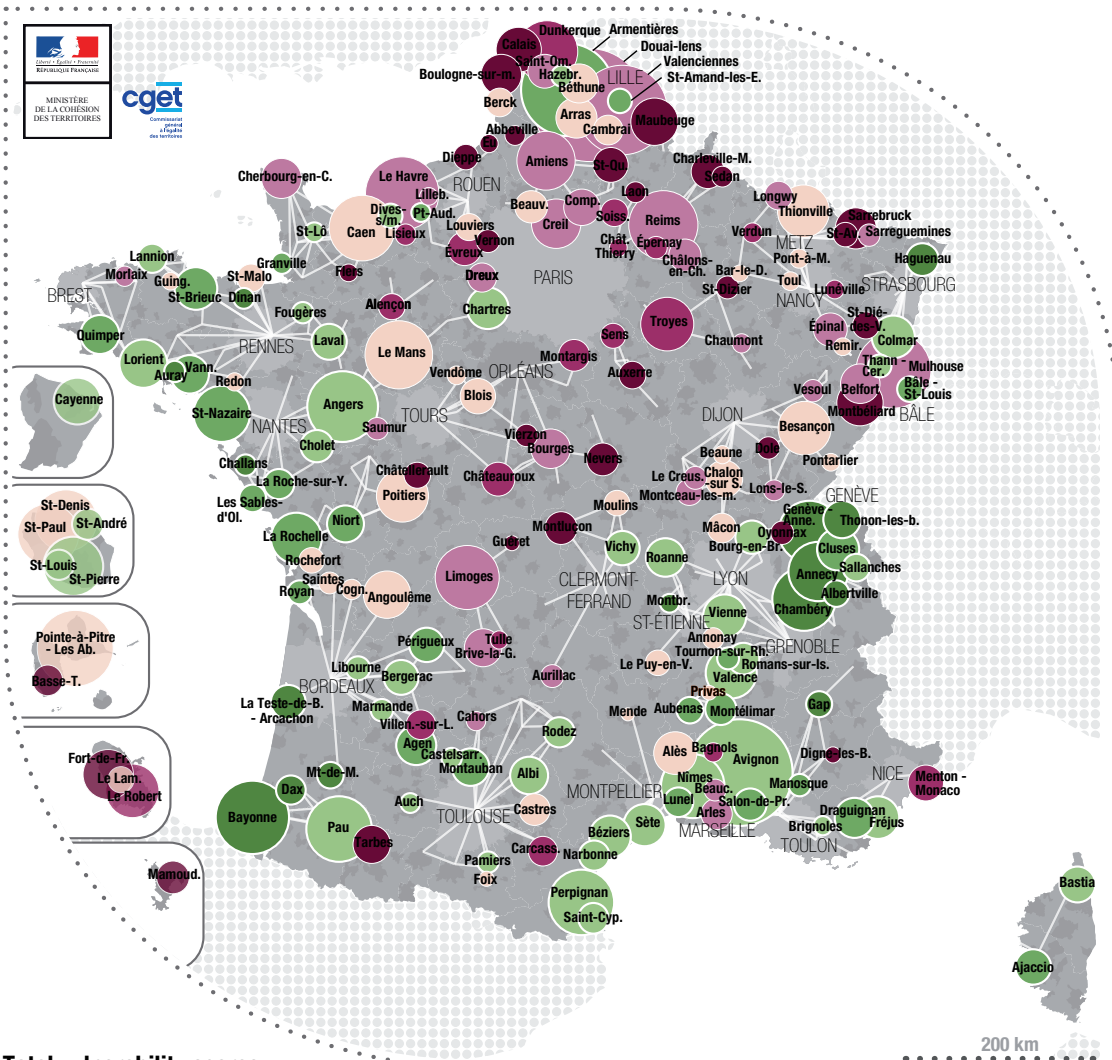
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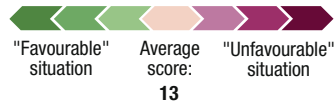**La Documentation française**

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WEAKNESSES AND TERRITORIAL SYSTEMS IN 203 MID-SIZED CITIES

Map of France showing mid-sized cities with total vulnerability scores. City labels include:

Dunkerque, Armentières, Calais, Saint-Om., Douai-lens, Valenciennes, St-Amand-les-E., Boulogne-sur-m., Hazebr., Béthune, LILLE, Berck, Arras, Cambrai, Maubeuge, Abbeville, Charleville-M., Dieppe, Amiens, St-Qu., Sedan, Cherbourg-en-C., Le Havre, Lilleb., ROUEN, Léon, Longwy, Thionville, Sarrebruck, Dives-s/m, Pt-Aud., Beauv., Comp., Soiss, Reims, Verdun, Sarreguemines, St-Lô, Caen, Louviers, Creil, Chât.Thierry, Épernay, METZ, Pont-à-M., Haguenau, Lannion, Lisieux, Vernon, Évreux, Châlons-en-Ch., Bar-le-D., Toul, NANCY, STRASBOURG, Morlaix, Granville, St-Malo, Dreux, PARIS, St-Dizier, Lunéville, St-Dié, Quimper, Guing., St-Brieuc, Dinan, Fougères, Chartres, Épinal des-V., Remir., Colmar, BREST, RENNES, Alençon, Troyes, Chaumont, Thann Cer., Mulhouse, Lorient, Laval, Sens, Vesoul, Belfort, Bâle-St-Louis, Auray, Vann., Redon, Le Mans, Vendôme, ORLÉANS, Montargis, Auxerre, Montbéliard, BÂLE, Cayenne, Angers, Saumur, TOURS, Blois, Besançon, St-Nazaire, NANTES, Cholet, Vierzon, Bourges, Beaune, Dole, Pontarlier, Challans, La Roche-sur-Y., Châtellerault, Châteauroux, Nevers, Le Creus., Chalon-sur-S., Lons-le-S., GENÈVE, St-Denis, St-Paul, St-André, Les Sables-d'Ol., Poitiers, Moulins, Montceau-les-m., Genève Anne., Thonon-les-b., St-Louis, St-Pierre, La Rochelle, Niort, Montluçon, Vichy, Mâcon, Roanne, Bourg-en-Br., Oyonnax, Cluses, Sallanches, Rochefort, Guéret, Annecy, Albertville, Pointe-à-Pitre-Les Ab., Saintes, Royan, Cogn., Angoulême, Limoges, LYON, Vienne, Chambéry, Basse-T., Périgueux, Tulle, Brive-la-G., Aurillac, Montb., Annonay, Le Puy-en-V., Tournon-sur-Rh., GRENOBLE, Libourne, Bergerac, Romans-sur-Is., Fort-de-Fr., Le Lam., Le Robert, La Teste-de-B.-Arcachon, Marmande, Villen.-sur-L., Cahors, Rodez, Mende, Aubenas, Valence, Privas, Montélimar, Gap, BORDEAUX, Agen, Castelsarr., Montauban, Albi, Alès, Bagnols, Avignon, Digne-les-B., NICE, Menton-Monaco, Mt-de-M., Dax, Auch, Castres, Nîmes, Beauc., Manosque, Lunel, Salon-de-Pr., Brignoles, Draguignan, Fréjus, Bayonne, Pau, Tarbes, TOULOUSE, MONTPELLIER, Arles, MARSEILLE, TOULON, Mamoud., Pamiers, Béziers, Sète, Foix, Carcass., Narbonne, Perpignan, Saint-Cyp., Bastia, Ajaccio

200 km

Total vulnerability scores

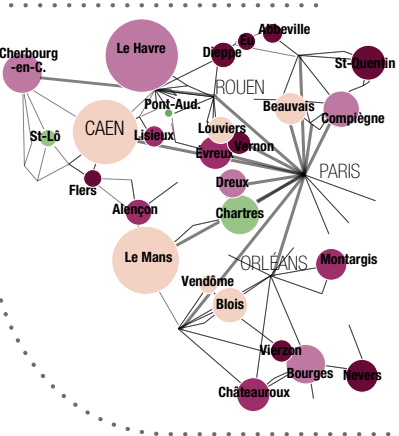"Favourable" situation — Average score: **13** — "Unfavourable" situation

The mid-sized cities' vulnerability scores are based on 3 themes:

- **Demographic vitality:** via the average annual growth rate of the population (2008-2013)
- **Economic vitality,** via the average annual growth rate of employment (2008-2013)
- **Social vulnerability:** the poverty rate (2013)

For each theme, a mid-sized city's score is attributed based on the decile of its position among all mid-sized cities.
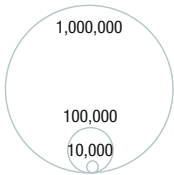
For example: for the demographic vulnerability scores: the 20 mid-sized cities with the lowest growth rate have a score of 9, the next 20 a score of 8, and so on.

The inter-regional system of Paris

Cities shown: Cherbourg-en-C., Le Havre, Dieppe, Abbeville, St-Quentin, Pont-Aud., ROUEN, Beauvais, Compiègne, St-Lô, CAEN, Lisieux, Louviers, Vernon, Évreux, PARIS, Flers, Dreux, Alençon, Chartres, Le Mans, Montargis, Vendôme, ORLÉANS, Blois, Vierzon, Bourges, Nevers, Châteauroux

Population
in 2014, by urban unit

1,000,000
100,000
10,000

Urban area

- Large
- Medium
- Small

Regional urban systems

National territory is organised into a network of **urban systems**. These interdependencies between urban areas are revealed by bringing together different movement indicators, such as commuting relationships, residential migrations, transport networks, head office-branch relationships, etc. Urban territories are involved in several levels of relationship.
An initial level of 26 urban systems has been revealed.

Vichy, Tulle). Twenty or so mid-sized cities are home to a particularly high proportion of people with no professional activity (23% and over, versus 17.4% across all mid-sized cities and 16.4% in France). These include virtually all mid-sized cities in the French Overseas Régions and Départements (Drom: Basse-Terre, Cayenne, Le Robert, Pointe-à-Pitre - Les Abymes, Saint-André, Saint-Denis, Saint-Louis, Saint-Pierre, Saint-Paul) and, in mainland France, Amiens, Beaucaire, Béziers, Calais, Douai-Lens, Forbach, Fougères, Maubeuge, Poitiers and Valenciennes.

FAIRLY HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT AND POVERTY RATES

Between 2008 and 2013, the unemployment rate increased by an average of 2.8 points in mid-sized cities, versus 2 points in France. This means that three-quarters of such cities have seen their unemployment rates rise more steeply than the French average. The rates in some thirty mid-sized cities have grown sharply (by between + 4 and + 6.8 points), putting the percentage of unemployed people at more than 15%. The situation in towns like Abbeville, Beaucaire, Cambrai, Narbonne, Saint-André or Saint-Quentin is particularly worrying as the already high unemployment rate back in 2008 (17% or more) has been compounded by further rises between 2008 and 2013 (from + 4 to + 6.8 points).

On average, the poverty rate is higher in mid-sized cities than across the rest of France (17.8% versus 14.5% in 2013). More than a quarter of populations in mid-sized cities, including those in the Drom (for example Basse-Terre, Cayenne, Le Lamentin, Saint-Denis, Saint-Paul), Hauts-de-France (Abbeville, Calais, Laon, Maubeuge, Saint-Quentin, Valenciennes) and Occitanie (Beaucaire, Béziers, Carcassonne, Nîmes) are living on the breadline. The high number of priority urban policy neighbourhoods (QPV) in mid-sized cities corroborates this finding.

Indeed, since the 2014 planning act for the city and urban cohesion, QPVs have only been identified on the poverty criterion - i.e. the concentration of populations on less than 60% of the median income. And 180 of the 203 mid-sized cities (88%) have at least one QPV. Between them they therefore account for almost a third of all QPVs. Angers, Reims, Perpignan, Limoges, Saint-Denis and Cayenne each have more than seven. More than a quarter of the urban unit's population across a dozen mid-sized cities lives in a QPV: Abbeville, Beauvais, Béziers, Cayenne, Lisieux, Mamoudzou, Saint-André, Sedan.

LESS QUALIFIED, LESS INTEGRATED YOUNG PEOPLE

On average, 36% of young people living in mid-sized cities have a higher education qualification, compared with 42.9% in the rest of France in 2013. In a dozen towns with industrial backgrounds (Castelsarrasin, Dieppe, Forbach, Oyonnax, Vierzon) or located in the Drom (Saint-André, Saint-Louis), fewer than a quarter of young people have attained this level of qualification.

Mid-sized cities are home to a higher proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) than the national average (21% versus 14%). Over a quarter of young people in a good thirty mid-sized cities are NEET. This proportion is particularly high in mid-sized cities in the Drom (Basse-Terre, Cayenne, Le Robert, Mamoudzou, Saint-André, Saint-Denis, Saint-Louis, Saint-Paul, Saint-Pierre) as well as cities in the Grand Est, Hauts-de-France (Abbeville, Boulogne-sur-Mer, Calais, Cambrai, Douai – Lens, Forbach, Laon, Maubeuge, Saint-Omer, Saint-Quentin, Sedan, Valenciennes), Normandie (Dieppe, Eu, Louviers) and Occitanie (Bagnols-sur-Cèze, Beaucaire, Béziers, Carcassonne, Narbonne, Perpignan).

VULNERABILITY AND TERRITORIAL SYSTEMS

THERE ARE SOME 30 VULNERABLE TOWNS

To gain a clearer idea of mid-sized cities' weak points, the CGET's Territorial Observatory cross-linked three cumulative criteria:

- demographic vitality, via the average annual growth rate of the population between 2008 and 2013;
- economic vitality, via the average annual growth rate of employment between 2008 and 2013;
- social vulnerability, *via* the poverty rate in 2013.

This assignment[9] identified 30 particularly vulnerable mid-sized cities. These cities are located within employment zones that are themselves struggling, which suggests that mid-sized cities reflect, and even accentuate, broader territorial dynamics (see map).

TRAJECTORIES LINKED TO URBAN SYSTEMS

Analysing mid-sized cities relative to the broader territorial systems[10] into which they fit offers up a different perspective. If metropolises are the hubs of these systems, then mid-sized cities are essential building blocks. Several configurations are possible:

- the mid-sized city is part of a metropolitan-wide trend,
- the mid-sized city has a polarising effect on a Département,
- the mid-sized city inter-relates with other mid-sized cities.

In the first scenario, involvement in a metropolitan-wide trend can be just as harmful as it can be beneficial to a mid-sized city. For some mid-sized cities, polarising their Départements can have a virtuous effect, while the distance from major zones of influence can prove detrimental to others. Lastly, inter-relationships between mid-sized cities are driven just as much by complementary as competitive aspects. As such, none of these configurations strike as evidently more beneficial than another; everything depends on the complementary aspects created between mid-sized cities and their urban systems.

In this respect, we could mention: the urban area communities of Alès, Nîmes, Sète and the metropolis of Montpellier, which signed an agreement in December 2016 to enhance their cooperation on such subjects as economic development, mobility or culture; Charleville-Mézières and Sedan, which have formed part of the same urban area community since 2013; or the "Sillon lorrain" metropolitan region which joins the towns and urban area communities of Épinal and Thionville together with the metropolises of Metz and Nancy.

This analysis also emphasises the need to bear in mind the regional environment of mid-sized cities (cross-border, coastal, island or mountain), which obviously has an influence on their dynamics.

[9] For each theme, a score has been attributed to each mid-sized city depending on the decile of its position among all mid-sized cities.
The advantage of this method is that is reveals a spectrum of situations, which can help to better identify the type(s) and degree of vulnerability(ies) of each mid-sized city.

[10] UMR Géographie-cités. "Les systèmes urbains et métropolitains" carried out by UMR Géographie-cités. June 2011.

"ACTION CŒUR DE VILLE" (TOWN CENTRE ACTION): A NATIONAL PLAN TO LEND A HAND TO MID-SIZED CITIES

Following the mid-sized city contracts of 1973 and "Pilot mid-sized cities" trial of 2007, the State has supported mid-sized cities through an array of schemes. For example, they have benefited from the local public investment support grant (DSIL): on 1 January 2017, 146 central municipalities and 50 intermunicipalities of the 203 mid-sized cities had already received one of the two appropriations of the DSIL grant, amounting to a total €121m for 442 projects. What is more, 90% of mid-sized cities have an urban contract, and a little over half are involved in the new national programme for urban renewal (NPNRU).

The President of the Republic considers mid-sized cities to be a national priority, and has therefore launched the "Action cœur de ville" (Town centre action) plan, which commits the whole of the Government for the entire five-year term. This is aimed at laying the efficient groundwork for the renewal and development of these cities, by channelling the means of the State and its partners towards the implementation of territorial projects led by intermunicipalities and central municipalities.

These projects will take a cross-cutting approach to addressing housing, mobility, trade, the presence of public services, university or tourism activities and pay particular attention to the centres of these towns and urban areas.

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