THE ROLE OF INLAND MID-SIZE TOWNS AND CITIES IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT. THE CASE OF ANDALUSIA

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In countries like Spain, urban development, economic processes and certain political decisions have improved the geo-economic situation of large cities, as they have absorbed population, economic activities, resources and infrastructure. From the opposite angle, this progressive concentration has resulted in a diminishment of the role played by mid-size cities. These (and also the rural environment) have gradually been pushed aside by the large economic hubs, and have become less attractive areas in economic terms, and emigration hot-spots, especially for young people. This decline in mid- and small-sized towns and cities has gone hand-in-hand with congestion in metropolitan areas, giving rise to a polarised territory lacking the balance that mid-size towns and cities could provide.

Although the limitations of mid-size towns and cities due to their size are evident – less socio-cultural diversity (which results in a degree of social endogamy) and less economic competitiveness (along with worse access to information and capital flows) – they can play a major role as territorial linkers and focus points for the more or less immediately surrounding area, and offer advantages over large urban metropolises: greater balance and sustainability due to reasons of scale; a more human side, which makes living together easier and enables the individual to identify with the place; easier administration which, moreover, may enable civic participation.

The variety of this type of settlements has led many authors to try to classify them, either by demographic size (a relative criterion that also depends on the spatial and economic context), or by function (the function of intermediaries, as links between large cities and rural settlements, the function of providers of goods and services to the surrounding area, a func-

tion of relieving the congestion and concentration of activities, the administrative function on the local tier, the function of regional/district development), or through their geographical location (within metropolitan regions, on their periphery, in more distant areas, etc.). The purpose of the present article is, precisely, to apply these criteria to the analysis of Andalusian mid-size towns and cities.

Andalusian mid-size towns and cities have been important in historical terms, especially due to the absence of any regional metropolis for a great many years, but also because of the mode of land occupation, which was concentrated for reasons of security and defence and in which the land ownership regime (large estates) forced non-owners (casual labourers) to be concentrated in agro-towns. Many mid-size towns and cities used to play the role of district capitals or 'county towns' and, although there have been highs and lows in their development, for many centuries they were just as important as any other large cities. Industrialisation and the rural exodus stripped them of their inhabitants and left them in a state of decline. Population, economic growth and communication infrastructure were increasingly concentrated in the large cities, sidelining the rest of the urban system. By the nineteen-eighties and -nineties the process to create autonomous regions had given shape to a city system that almost wholly gravitated around first-tier capital city agglomerations, weakening intra-provincial links, while not improving inter-provincial links to any great extent, either. The predominant discourse in Andalusian spatial policy was set down in major planning instruments, such as the Andalusian Spatial Plan (*POTA*), which defines the role of mid-size towns and cities within the framework of balanced and sustainable spatial development and states the potential that these towns and cities have as: a) heritage interest (monumental cities), b) the typical Andalusian and Mediterranean urban system, and c) their ability as district capitals to organise the region on the basis of populations identifying with the territory. Emphasis is placed on the position of mid-size towns and cities as intermediaries between the provincial hub and rural towns, and, as the glue that holds the territory together and, with the services and amenities that they possess (hospitals, supermarkets, some leisure centres, etc.), integrators of the district as a whole with the aid of transport networks to lend support to this link-up. In general lines, Andalusian territorial policy pursues a polycentric settlement system based around the territorial viability of mid-size towns and cities as district centres. The *POTA* recognises the importance of historical cities such as those that have shaped the Andalusian urban system. The implementation model in the territory must be preserved for future generations, and it is only through their conservation that Andalusian towns and cities will continue to possess the aspects that distinguish them from the rest of Spain and Europe.

Andalusian mid-size towns and cities have been classified according to criteria such as: 1) the size of their populations –the 20,000-100,000 inhabitants bracket is used, with data taken from the most recent available census (2011). The towns of Dos Hermanas and Marbella have been included despite exceeding this threshold, as they perform functions that put them on a par with other mid-size towns and cities, and they are not regarded as regional centres in the *POTA*; 2) geographical location (with respect to metropolitan areas, on the coast and inland) using the model proposed by Kunzmann (2010), although this has been adapted to Andalusian circumstances and the category of border towns/cities has been omitted, as there is only one Andalusian mid-size town (Ayamonte) located on one of the international borders whose importance has been so greatly diminished by the Schengen Agreement. In

addition, as the metropolitan reality exercises a key influence over the way that mid-size towns and cities evolve, criteria based on Feria Toribio and Susino Arbucias (2005) were devised to delimit metropolitan areas: commuting, which captures the social/functional inter-dependence of the areas (one municipality must send or receive from another a flow of over 100 people which, moreover, must represent over 15% of its occupants in the first case, or of its jobs, in the second; a minimum central city population volume (100,000 inhabitants, in line with the Spanish and Andalusian urban reality). Eight metropolitan areas were identified on this basis: seven provincial capitals (Almeria-El Ejido, Bay of Cadiz, Cordoba, Granada, Huelva, Malaga-Marbella and Seville) and Algeciras Bay. Mid-size Andalusian towns and cities are classified by location, with 37 integrated in metropolitan areas, 20 further away from their influence, in the Andalusian rural interior, and 11 located on the coast. Those in the first of these types –*mid-size towns and cities integrated in metropolitan areas*– are obviously imbued with the influence of the metropolitan area and its dynamics, and as such are towns and cities shaped by the dynamics generated by or towards the large regional centres that have grown disproportionately due to changes in preferences for single-family dwellings (lower in price than in the large cities) and/or the specific industries established there. The second type –*coastal mid-size town and cities*- includes some that have benefitted from a particular economic dynamic determined by the boom in the tourism and building sector and, in many cases, have seen major developments in intensive agriculture with crops planted under plastic. The boom in these economic sectors –almost always speculative– has led to these towns and cities developing rapidly and being equipped with good infrastructure. As a result they attract a large number of immigrants and the available incomes have risen. The *inland mid-size towns and cities,* meanwhile, are the successors of the old agro-towns, and continue to be placed in a less favourable position as far as demographic and economic growth are concerned. This may also result in a lack of interest with respect to both public and private investment, although, when preserved in an acceptable way, their historical and environmental heritage is an advantage and a strength.

These different urban types have evolved in different ways, as, up to 1950, a greater volume of population was concentrated in the mid-size towns and cities in the interior than in all other mid-size towns and cities. It was from that year on that their populations began to stagnate, and even go into recession (nineteen-sixties and seventies) compared to the increasing populations of mid-size towns and cities in metropolitan areas and, to a lesser extent, of those on the coast. The mid-size towns and cities situated inside metropolitan areas became subsumed into the metropolises and their behaviour was more the result of the changes to the whole than individual or local behaviour. Those on the coast were also involved in large-scale socio-economic and territorial changes (the real estate bubble and the disproportionate growth of the services sector). Compared to these situations, even recognising their role as territorial linkers and focal points, the mid-size towns and cities of the interior have been overlooked by many of the territorial policies, and not provided with any of the infrastructure and public services put in place in recent decades. Why have there been these different types of development depending on location? Basically because certain spontaneous dynamics have come into play (economic changes, market trends, people's preferences, etc.), but also dynamics induced by the public powers (investment, transport infrastructure, siting of public amenities, spatial plans that show greater preference towards some areas –metropolitan and

coastal mid-size towns and cities –over others– inland mid-size towns and cities). These dynamics empower the large hubs and marginalise above all the mid-size towns and cities in the interior. Despite political discourse highlighting the role that the latter should play in spatial balance, and state such plans in the sub-regional territorial plans (*POT*), the reality shaped by market forces and public investments is different, as the result is the unbridled development of the large cities, and metropolitan and coastal areas, with serious consequences for regional spatial balance.

To improve spatial balance it is necessary for a greater share of public investment to be allocated to inland mid-size towns and cities, to provide them with new transport infrastructure, with health and education services that are fit for purpose, and to revitalise them so as to attract qualified people and new activities by enhancing their location, quality of life and environmental value.