
Medium-sized and/or intermediate cities in Catalonia

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Of the 947 municipalities in Catalonia, 123 have more than 10,000 inhabitants (2021). They account for 12.9 % of the municipalities and 82.4 % of the population, totalling 7,519,843 people. Therefore, Catalonia has a major population concentration in municipalities that are considered cities for statistical and administrative purposes. Of these cities, 63 have between 20,000 and 500,000 inhabitants, which is the range that the European Union considers medium-sized cities; according to that calculus, only Barcelona would be considered a large city or metropolis.

Most of these cities considered medium-sized are along the coastal corridor or in the counties that are relatively close to the coast. This pattern has been accentuated since last century as a consequence of the shift of the quickest transport routes (railway, roads and motorways) closer to the coastal area, the existence of ports and airports and the concentration of industry in the ring encircling Barcelona.

In a rank-size graph of cities by population, we can see a steep drop off from the population of the largest city (Barcelona) to the eleventh (Girona), which has almost 100,000 inhabitants. After that, the decline is more gradual, and a very gentle downward slope that virtually turns into a horizontal line begins at around 50,000 inhabitants (Mollet del Vallès). In Catalonia, these cities with between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants would be considered medium-sized cities.

Not all medium-sized cities can be considered intermediate, if by that term we mean not cities that are near the median or central quartiles in a population distribution but those that play the role of market or service hubs, that is, cities that play a mediating role between the large capital city and the rural villages or small towns and cities. They are cities that historically played an important role as power centres (episcopal sees, royal cities, heads of jurisdictions of political and judicial power, etc.). The majority of these cities have undergone industrial development,

and many have been and still are important retail and service hubs. They are the home to specialised retailers and redistributors of goods to smaller towns, along with notable education, healthcare, legal, financial consulting and other services.

Intermediate cities have a clear sphere of influence made up of a series of nearby villages and small towns. They are spheres of influence by force because the inhabitants of other towns have to travel to a given intermediate city, and not another, for many matters. There are invisible borders between different jurisdictions and in the provision of public services, regardless of whether a given city is the most accessible for shopping, using services or engaging in specialised free-time activities.

In contrast, there are medium-sized cities that have no sphere of influence, and their surroundings may be comprised of other medium-sized cities that have no jurisdictional or administrative power over other towns. Many of these cities are on the coast and have grown through tourism or because they are near a large city or industrial pole and have turned into bedroom communities.

Intermediate cities have a series of advantages, such as their size, which facilitates human contact; their history, which confers identity and fosters cohesion; an environmental situation which is usually more favourable than in large cities; a higher level of services and facilities; a more balanced social system; and a more sustainable urban system. They tend to have fewer conflicts than large cities and are easier to manage, among other features. Their most common services include healthcare, especially second-tier hospitals, and higher education centres. Today many intermediate cities have university branches, even if they are outposts of another university. In many cities, the centres employing the most people are the public administration, healthcare and universities (as in Girona, Reus, Manresa, Vic, Mataró, Tortosa, etc.).

The fact that they have advantages does not detract from their disadvantages, most prominently the local governments' fewer resources in relation to the services they provide, less social mobility than in large cities, less cultural and social diversity, more difficult access to the main information and capital flows, problems maintaining old and peripheral neighbourhoods, fewer highly qualified professionals, etc.

In Catalonia, some intermediate cities have lost economic clout and population since the end of the past century. One of the most pressing causes is the decline in companies and jobs in the traditional industrial sectors, a phenomenon which is being aggravated by globalisation. In 2000, there were 657,275 salaried and freelance workers in industry paying into the social security system, but 20 years later this figure had dropped by 182,438 people, a 28 % decline. The number of companies with industrial activities dropped by 17,717 units in the same period, 45 % fewer than the 39,829 industrial companies in 2000. This decrease is also affecting large cities in the Barcelona metropolitan area. In intermediate cities, the negative effects have gone deeper because the old industries were not replaced by new advanced activities and the defunct companies and lost jobs were not offset (as in Reus, Manresa, Igualada, etc.).

Another negative phenomenon for medium-sized cities is the disappearance of their savings banks. Of the ten savings banks in 2000, only one remains. The nine that have disappeared had total assets of around 150 billion euros, and this has meant the loss of significant financial muscle which was used by the small and medium-sized businesses in the cities and their sphere of influence. The existence of a directorate general in a place meant not only decision-making power but also specialised jobs like lawyers, business school graduates and marketing and communication specialists, among others, that offer above-average salaries. Yet the city and its county also benefited from an array of social and cultural efforts which may be at risk of extinction and are hindering new ones from emerging. Cities like Girona, Tarragona, Manresa, Vilafranca del Penedès, Mataró, Vic-Manlleu, Terrassa and Sabadell have clearly emerged worse off from the downfall of financial entities which had deep roots in their sphere of action.

Medium-sized and intermediate cities play a crucial role within the Catalan city system and network. A country's urban structure can be based on either a large city or metropolis or a much more balanced structure wherein the big city has close ties with a series of other cities scattered around the territory. The latter entails an intense network of relationships between cities beyond the urban hierarchy. The exchange of ideas, capital and products among cities tends to benefit a population that is deconcentrated in different cities while also keeping strong bonds with the villages and towns in their respective spheres of influence, regardless of whether or not they align with the administrative counties.

Another fact worth noting about medium-sized and intermediate cities is that they have witnessed an increase in both population and urbanisation due to the role they play as hubs and suppliers of specialised goods and services. Many of these cities, just like Barcelona, have gradually encroached towards the neighbouring towns to the extent that they are now virtually connected, yet they are facing urban planning issues due to a lack of prior planning. Today, many intermediate cities are also cities with indeterminate boundaries, despite the administrative boundaries. They are diffuse, using Francesco Indovina's term, if not blurred cities. They are cities which are continuations of the neighbouring towns as urban neighbourhoods spring up around their edges, middle- and upper-class residential estates are created outside their boundaries and retail areas around them and economic activity estates in neighbouring towns crop up. All these new phenomena mean heavy daily mobility among municipalities, which have prioritised individual transport to counter the lack a solid collective transport network.

Given all the above, we advocate reinforcing the role of intermediate cities, which have been essential in Catalonia's economic, social and political structure. These cities and their immediate spheres of influence or surrounding areas need joint urban planning based on steering plans, as well as shared administrative management of certain collective services and facilities, given the fact that Catalonia's current administrative structure reflects the nineteenth century, not the twenty-first. Only by strengthening the basic cornerstones of the structure comprised of intermediate cities do we believe that the country's currently diminished economic and social potentialities can flourish once again.