

Local responses to transition in small towns

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Small towns are first of all administrative entities defined as such by the central state. However, the response of small towns to changes indicates that their inhabitants can also develop unique forms of local organization and interaction and thus form a social entity. Considering the demographic structure of the settlements, the social structure and the coping strategies of these communities are necessarily different from those of villages or a metropolis.

In the previous paper I argued that small towns are best described by their specific dynamics. These dynamics have two distinct but interrelated dimensions: On the one hand, the population of small towns shows, due to the small number and close proximity of its inhabitants, a strong cohesion. The inhabitants are linked to one another via a number of interconnected, local and largely informal networks. On the other hand, the towns' residents in general and local entrepreneurs in particular are highly mobile and resort to a wide variety of external linkages to ensure the access to locally scarce resources.

The survey conducted in two Vietnamese towns indicates that their inhabitants, particularly local entrepreneurs, frequently travel to other regions – both urban and rural – and maintain a large number of different contacts outside their town. However, although many of these entrepreneurs would have the resources necessary to move into larger cities which are commonly regarded as offering better income opportunities, most either choose to remain in the town or return to it at some point of their working life. The towns even attract migrants from other regions. This shows that the local population and its town have found ways of coping with the local impacts of transformation in a way that makes them attractive places to live and work in.

Of the various factors which influence how a settlement copes with change, impulses from changes in the local population are of a special relevance. These changes may result from migrant labourers, spouses from other regions, deployed experts or returning locals. In small towns, each newly arriving or returning individual contributes to minute changes in the town's economic landscape and social structure. The community is so small that

new members are forced to interact with other residents on a daily basis. They thus integrate themselves rapidly, enter local networks and thus to a certain extent also share the new knowledge or ideas they bring into the town.

The actors bringing novel ideas and know-how into the community are an indicator for the role of small towns as interfaces (between rural and urban, state and grass roots etc.). And, as indicated above, the interface can only be a local source of (social and other) capital and thus a force enhancing the adaptability and resilience of the community as a whole if the actors bridging the interface and their resources are integrated into the community. This leads back to the question of how the two dimensions of local interaction (internal cooperation – external networking) are interrelated. Conceptualizing this also with regards to the role of space will be the objective of the paper and the discussion it aims at stimulating.