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## RESEARCH IN ECONOMICS AND RURAL SOCIOLOGY

### Polarization of the territory: the role of employment and everyday facilities

*The combination of the spatial concentration of resources (jobs and facilities) and their attractiveness to populations helps determine polarization sites and their zones of influence: the geographical concentration of jobs and the commuting that they involve are behind the definition of Zoning into urban areas and rural employment zones; grouping amenities together (shops and services) as well as the reasons for visits to them shows how territory is organized into living basins animated by market towns and small cities meeting the local populations' needs to various degrees.*

#### Polarization by jobs

Most often, the spatial nomenclature used is that of zoning into urban centres and rural employment centres, as put forward by the INSEE (National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies) and INRA in its 2002 edition. It is built around the notions of dominant urban area and dominant rural area from the population census data (1999) (see Vallès, 2002, for further details on the definitions). It differentiates 4 main categories of areas, the first two in the dominant urban area and the other two in the dominant rural area (map 1):

- **Urban centres** are urban units offering 5,000 jobs or more. There are 354 of them and they contain 61% of the French population (35.7 million inhabitants) and 72% of jobs. Half of the communes of 10,000 to 20,000 inhabitants and almost all those over 20,000 inhabitants are urban centres.
- **Periurban communes** include the communes with at least 40% of the residential population working in one or more urban centres. They account for one third of the territory, and one fifth of the French population (12.3 million inhabitants) live there.
- **Rural employment centres** cover employment cities in the rural area offering at least 1,500 jobs, and their fringes formed of communes with at least 40% of the residential population working in the rest of the employment centre of this rural area. These 525 centres account for 5.6% of the population (3.3 million inhabitants) and 6.1% of the territorial area.
- The municipalities which do not fall into any of the above categories form the **other communes of the dominant rural area**. There are 16,730 of them and they represent 12.4% of the population (7.3 million), covering more than half of the territory.

#### The role of everyday facilities

The spatial concentration of facilities and their attractiveness to the populations help define the market towns and areas of influence. These market towns, communes or small towns which stand out clearly from their environment, form the heart of many living basins.

#### *The location rationales of facilities...*

The location of facilities for the population fits in with a compromise between, on the one hand, scale economies which generate a concentration due to the size of the distribution units, and on the other hand a reduction in the costs of transporting people, since these costs are lower when the services are close to consumers. The terms of this arbitrage vary according to the rate of visits to the facilities and the dynamism of their existing needs. The busiest services (baker's shops, grocer's shops, tobacconist's...) are spread over the territory and those for which demand is rising (doctors, nurses...) tend to be scattered. On the other hand, less common facilities such as hypermarkets, cinemas, medical analysis laboratories or hospitals are concentrated in the most highly populated communes. Moreover, some facilities such as healthcare are organized according to a complementarity between local services and heavy services, which may involve a complementarity between the private and public rationales. Last, for reasons of territorial equity, public authorities may play a role in the maintenance or development of non-market services and/or local shops.

#### *...Determine the living basins...*

These localization rationales, which apply to each service considered separately, combine with consumers' propensity to group their commuting into multi-purpose commuting. Consequently, there is a concentration of facilities in central places. A remote facility is rare and few people use it. Very often, set around a public service such as a post-office, there may be shops or local services such as baker's or butcher's shops or a doctor's surgery. When

a municipality has a certain type of facility, it usually has the whole set of shops and services around it.

The spatial concentration of facilities and their attractiveness show how territorial organization in the basins is animated by market towns. These basins are made up of an urban unit or a rural municipality, attracting the population from the neighbouring municipalities for the medium range facilities, or having more than half of such facilities without exercising attraction. The range of intermediate facilities includes shops (supermarkets or hypermarkets, bookshops, hardware stores, household appliance stores, clothes shops, shoe shops, furniture shops), financial services (banks or savings banks or notaries); local State services (police stations, high schools, tax offices); health care (dentist, physiotherapist, ambulance service, vet).

The living basins divide mainland France into 1916 territories of various sizes in which the inhabitants have access to the main shops and services (education, health, and administration). They are quite often formed by a service hub of less than 30,000 inhabitants and municipalities attracted to that hub, but some of them are organized around bigger towns (urban units of more than 30,000 inhabitants). The following results will concern the first set, called the restricted rural group comprising 1745 living basins.

...*With contrasting potentials*

In order to assess how living basins can meet the needs of the resident population, we can compare their level of facilities with what it could be, in the light of their population. This comparison is carried out by differentiating 4 categories of facilities (competitive facilities,<sup>1</sup> non competitive ones,<sup>2</sup> healthcare services,<sup>3</sup> educational facilities<sup>4</sup>), to which local employment is added.

On this basis, we distribute the living basins into 430 *dependent basins*, having too few services and jobs to meet local needs, 574 *slightly autonomous living basins*, and 741 *autonomous living basins* offering a wide range of local services and jobs providing the residents with predominantly local resources for their supplies and jobs (map 2).

Therefore, the autonomy of the living basins seems to be strongly linked to the urban hierarchical system: the urban hubs and employment hubs of the rural area where jobs are already concentrated also form dense service hubs. Almost all the living basins centred around a market town (even if this has less than 30,000 inhabitants) and three-quarters of the basins animated by an employment centre in a rural area are autonomous (table 1). The other basins centred around municipalities or small cities offering less facilities and jobs are more heterogeneous: 59% and 30% of the periurban basins are respectively dependant or slightly autonomous, these proportions being reversed for the other rural basins, 21% and 58% respectively. Given the population to be served, we could conclude that compared to the rural areas, periurban areas are under-equipped. However, we must qualify this observation. The high proportion of periurban commuting towards urban areas and the high mobility rate of households help them find shops and facilities that are unavailable in their living environments or which do not meet their choice or quality requirements. Conversely, the “good” rural facility must be counterbalanced by the low mobility rate of the households living there and by the weakness of the shops and local private amenities which lead to a weakness of the centres in question.

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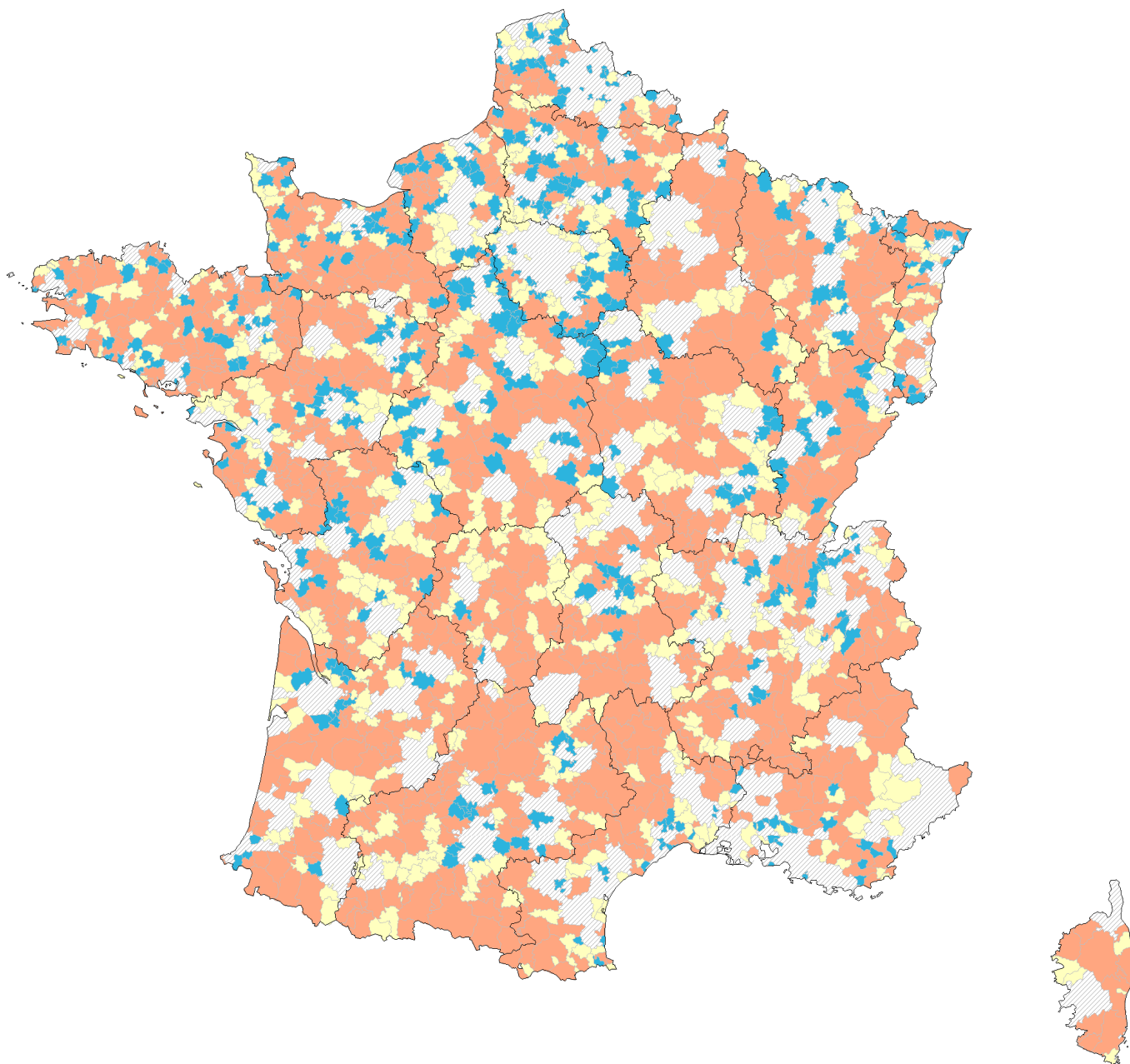
<sup>1</sup> Vet, hyper or supermarket, bank, shoe shop, hardware store, household appliance store, bookshop, furniture shop, clothes shop department store, retail business.

<sup>2</sup> Police station, tax office, post-office, kindergarten, school of music, retirement home, sports hall, notary.

<sup>3</sup> Ambulance, general practitioner, dentist, physiotherapist, nurse, pharmacy as for local facilities. Short-stay hospitals, emergency wards, medium or long-stay hospitals, as for hospital facilities.

<sup>4</sup> Junior high school, general and technical high school.

**Autonomy of the living basins**  
**Map 1 – Zoning into urban areas and rural and employment areas**



**Bassins...**

- ... dépendants
- ... faiblement autonomes
- ... autonomes
- Hors référentiel rural restreint
- Autre commune

Source : INSEE, IFEN, INRA, SCEES (2003)

**For further information**

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