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"Small French towns and territorial development strategies in rural areas. Saint Jean d'Angély (Nouvelle-Aquitaine), between reindustrialization and the well-being economy*"

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Current (political and scientific) discourse on the role of sparsely populated areas in the territorial dynamics of developed countries is characterized by ambivalence.

On the one hand, some researchers describe their role as subaltern in territorial dynamics (Fol, 2020), all the more so when industry is involved (Férérol, 2014). Similarly, and despite the strategies implemented by elected officials to increase their influence (Le Saout, 2015; Frinault, 2022), small towns struggle to assert themselves in ever larger and more integrated intercommunities.

On the other hand, some authors point to the return to favor of these less densely populated areas and highlight their advantages as a breeding ground for activities that promote sustainable territorial development. Rural areas offer access to quality land (Dedeire and Razafimehefa, 2014), at a lower cost than elsewhere (Talandier, 2008). What's more, thanks to the immediate physical proximity between players (Talandier and Gros-Balthazard, 2020), the small size of the region favors the meeting and coordination of project stakeholders, elements that are all the more crucial and complex for the current development of activities in the face of the new territorial organization and the resulting distribution of competencies.

We put these two theses to the test by examining the potential for revitalizing sparsely populated areas, based on a study of the trajectory of Saint-Jean-d'Angély, a small central town with fewer than 7,000 inhabitants, which since 2016 has belonged to the Vals de Saintonges community of municipalities (comprising 140 communes) in the Charente-Maritime region (France).

While Saint-Jean-d'Angély was a commercial stronghold in the 19th century and experienced an industrial boom in the 20th century, it is gradually facing demographic and economic decline. In recent years, the town has focused its economic development on the theme of "good living" (a spa project and the re-industrialization of the organic food sector), using and transforming the natural resources on its territory in a sustainable way.

This case study examines the strengths and weaknesses of small (rural) towns and their specific features in today's territorial dynamics. Are small towns the right scale for reconciling economic development, ecological transition and quality of life? What is the role of local residents and the "care" economy (around the organic sector and the installation of the spa in our case)? What roles and what rooms for maneuver do mayors have in the development of these communities? Are we witnessing a renewal of territorial development methods and models in the face of territorial administrative reorganization? Ultimately, this work questions the dual vision of Rural vs. Urban and seeks to better characterize the interactions between actors and territories (Talandier, 2023).

Methodologically, our work is based on a detailed analysis of the role of private and public players in the productive rebound of a small town, and of the socio-spatial representations of its inhabitants, using a mixed method. Aware of the strengths and weaknesses of statistics, we complement our quantitative analysis (i.e., when data doesn't yet speak for itself) with the actors' own stories and analyze their potential for contradiction.