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Key note speech: Governance of new geographies in the perspective of sustainable development

ESPON Seminar

**“Small and medium-sized cities: drivers of sustainable development and urban-rural cooperation” – Cuenca, 15-16 November 2023**

*Good morning, everyone. First, I would like to thank ESPON and the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union for the invitation to this important Seminar. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to bring the point of view of Globus et Locus to the issues being discussed here today.*

Contemporary cities are facing huge challenges in terms of re-organisation, specialisation, and inclusion. These major challenges are related, on the one hand, to the progressive globalisation and, on the other hand, to the interpretation and enhancement of what is ‘local’.

The acceleration of information has reset time and space, reshaping every aspect of our lives. This transformation has profoundly disrupted the balance between the global and the local, revolutionizing decision-making processes and the way we build relationships. For this reason, the phenomenon of ‘glocalism’ is one of the real challenges that contemporary cities have to face.

Spaces and time, indeed, are so stretched and expanded that information and *assets*’ movement has become more and more urgent. In this context, it is crucial to understand the impact of this extreme reconfiguration of space and time - that is the essence of glocalism - in reconsidering contemporary cities in a polycentric way. Likewise, the long-standing discussion about urban corridors have become crucial in terms of administration and territorial development (e.g. the high-speed train; the management of blue or green infrastructures, such as Po and Reno rivers; or the Alps’ and Pireneus’ management).

On this premise, the investigation of small and medium-sized cities is at stake.

Small and medium-sized cities, often possessing unique attributes like liveability and a distinctive cultural or productive identity, face new types of limitations in their self-sufficiency. They depend on

networks with other similar-sized cities, striving to avoid being overshadowed by larger urban centres, and often lack the strength to cultivate surrounding peri-urban rural areas. To thrive, they require vigorous dynamism and the active involvement of influential stakeholders.

In this context, Globus et Locus, the Association of Institutions that I chair, has been analysing what and how northern Italian regions are managing glocal phenomenon (e.g. urban development and entrepreneurship, tourism, logistics). The reason why we choose to work on this context is specifically related to its urban development, which can be considered as a *continuum* of cities (small, medium and big), and a polycentric macro-region. The ESPON IMAGINE Project revealed significant ongoing processes and emerging dynamics between territories and functions in the crucial region between Milano and Bologna. It highlighted the limited capacity of the current institutional setup to govern and regulate the observed developments, particularly concerning aspects like mobility, logistics, and environmental issues on a metropolitan and regional scale. As already mentioned, these topics prescind the traditional national or regional policies and dynamics, but they operate within a glocal context (that involve, for instance, not only large cities like Milan and Rome but also small and medium sized cities in their connections across national borders). On the one hand, there is the local nature of the places; on the other, similar dynamics in terms of emerging functional geographies can be observed around the world.

The macro-region operates as a complex system. Its dynamics are very frequently trans-regional – but also trans-national – and indeed they are difficult to manage within the administrative framework. For this reason, an ongoing research project led by Globus et Locus and supported by three banking foundations in northern Italy<sup>1</sup>, focuses on understanding the glocal role of institutional and functional actors in territorial development. This research aims at identifying innovative governance guidelines that can involve both functional and institutional stakeholders in decision-making processes,

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<sup>1</sup> The research project “Il ruolo glocale dei soggetti istituzionali e funzionali nello sviluppo del territorio” (2022- ongoing) is developed by Globus et Locus and supported by Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo, Fondazione Cariplo, Fondazione del Monte di Bologna e Ravenna.

addressing the complexities associated with social and economic functions spread across administrative boundaries.

The innovation we are aiming to seek is therefore twofold:

- on one hand, there is the need to understand that the role of small and medium-sized cities is relevant, not only because they are ‘satellites’, but because they strongly embody the nature of the whole territory (e.g. manufacturing sites in the Emilia Romagna region; historical and artistic city centres; the eno-gastronomic routes; ...);
- on the other hand, medium and small-sized cities are relatively important, while discussing the acceleration and development of big cities, as they are part of the capillary system of infrastructures where scale economy and transaction costs are still convenient.

The new functional geographies call for tackling major challenges related to sustainable urban growth, environmental issues, and economic and social innovation by developing new forms of governance and cooperation, between large cities and small and medium-sized cities, between traditional and innovative actors.

This is one of the reasons, perhaps the main one, why we believe that the younger generations need to be actively involved as they are more likely to grasp and adapt to new technologies and innovations, such as the complexities surrounding artificial intelligence. Engaging them is essential in driving and embracing innovative advancements.

I am deeply grateful for the important opportunity offered by ESPON in conjunction with the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU to share our work and reflections on these crucial topics.

Thank you!