

DOCTORAL SCHOOL IN ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEERING

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**Planning African rural towns. The case of Caia and Sena,
Mozambique.**

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Abstract

Over the last few years, academic research and international aid organizations have been underlining the important role that the small towns of Sub-Saharan Africa have in promoting development in the surrounding rural areas and in reversing the polarization trend of major urban centers. Nevertheless, defining the particular characteristics of these towns—which the majority of African population lives in or refers to—and analyzing the relevant transformations that they are experiencing are still unsolved issues. Moreover, until now, policies, programs and projects related to African urban development have focused mainly on major urban centers, while small towns have an almost complete lack of planning on how to accommodate people coming from the surrounding rural areas and how to provide them with services. The aim of the research is to define a conceptual and methodological framework to support the spatial planning activity of local administrators and technicians in Mozambique small towns.

To reach the objective of a spatial planning process that results from the thorough comprehension of this particular typology of human settlement, the research was based mainly on the analysis of case studies: Caia and Sena, two *vilas rurales* situated in a rural district in central Mozambique along the Zambezi River. Together with literature review, a field research was conducted by the author in the district of Caia that consisted of the analysis of already existing data and documents, direct observation, interviews with institutional and non-institutional actors, and a household survey in Sena. Afterwards, a SWOT analysis was used as a tool to manage such a greatly varied amount of information. The research process allowed to identify the main features of the small towns, that are here denominated as “rural towns”, and to understand the major trends related to the “rur-urbanization” process.

The rural town is defined as a hybrid settlement pattern in which persisting elements of the rural world melt together with emerging urban characteristics. *Vilas rurales*, in fact, are traditionally rural contexts characterized by a dominance of vernacular settlement patterns and architectures. The socio-economic and cultural features of the towns, as well as their physical structure, are rapidly changing as a consequence of the ongoing “modernization”.

The risk is that a rapid and uncontrolled urbanization process could threaten the natural, economic and cultural bases of the small towns without adequately replacing

them. Thereby, some suggestions follow on how spatial planning can contribute to the sustainable growth of the rural towns.

The central idea that is proposed herein is to preserve the rural characteristics, which are widely present within the rural towns, and to integrate them with the emerging "urban" features. This strategy aims to support the subsistence activities adopted by the majority of the population and to outline a spatial planning process that responds to the specific characteristics of this typology of human settlement by culturally appropriate means.

The thesis consists of three parts. The first part presents the results of the literature review. The origin of the debate on small and intermediate urban centers of Third World countries in the late 1970s is presented in Chapter 1 while Chapter 2 actualizes this debate, also in the light of major processes occurring at global level and affecting African small towns. Chapter 3 stresses the big gap in urbanization theory and practices related to small towns of Africa and focuses on their characteristic of being predominantly vernacular settlements in which a "deculturation" process" is taking place as a consequence of the imposition/adoption of western cultural models. The second part of the thesis presents the analysis of case studies.

The research methodology is outlined in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, Caia and Sena are contextualized within their macro-institutional and regional contexts. Then, an analysis of the rural towns is proposed at the local level. Chapter 6 offers a snapshot of the emerging lifestyles in Sena through the results of the household survey. The rur-urbanization process is described in Chapter 7, first by analysing the spatial evolution of Caia and Sena from a historical perspective and, then, by proposing four key topics that identify the main features of the rural towns and describe the major trends related to the rur-urbanization process. The third part of the research, Chapter 8, presents the conclusions. First of all a definition and an assessment of the rural town is offered. Moreover, a conceptual framework is presented that relates key topics, risks, planning principles and actions related to the spatial planning activity in the rural towns. Finally, a methodological framework is proposed that translates the conceptual framework into more operational terms by outlining a spatial planning process aimed at the rural towns.