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Special Session Proposal

From neglect to nuance: exploring the diversity of second-tier cities

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Abstract

After years of relative neglect, the importance of small and medium-sized cities for sustainability, territorial cohesion and balanced urban systems is being acknowledged in research and policy. When explored through a relational lens, these cities are often called 'second-tier cities', to denote that their positions in relation to larger, more dominant cities in regional or national systems, may partly determine whether they 'win from second' or stay in the shadow of their larger counterparts. Despite the growing literature on the topic, research has not yet produced sufficient nuance and differentiation within second-tier cities. Developing theory and empirical research specifically for these cities rather than downgrading questions designed for larger metropolises was important, but the next decisive step is to abandon the assumption of second-tier cities as a homogenous type and start considering the diversity of their profiles, trajectories, challenges and opportunities. To fill this knowledge gap, this special session takes stock of ongoing research on second-tier cities, focusing on their specificity beyond the mere comparison with 'first-tier' cities. As a tentative guideline, we argue that second-tier cities can be conceptualized in the following ways:

- Second-tier cities as **Gateways** of connectivity and accessibility, often port cities, but also airport cities and high-speed train connections.

- Second-tier cities as **Hubs** of specific activities, including university cities, places of technological innovation and knowledge centres.

- Second-tier cities as **Nodes**, playing roles of complementarity, cooperation and/or competition in larger networks, such as polycentric urban regions.

- Second-tier cities as **Pathfinders**, pursuing innovative development paths in areas such as wellbeing, slow-living networks and post-growth, among others.

- Second-tier cities as **Landscapes** characterized by specific urban forms, including industrial cities, 15-minute cities, and historic cities.

- Second-tier cities as **Political Agents**, vying for political voice, lobbying power and representation in contexts where some places matter more than others.

We welcome new thematic perspectives inspired by these and other angles, which can shed light on the extent to which each second-tier city is a unique and distinctive case. If you are interested in advancing second-tier city research, please submit your abstract and join us in the Azores. We are happy to discuss publication options with the participants in this session.