

**Regional insertion and the centrality of the small municipality:
the case of Piraúba-MG**

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ABSTRACT

It is commonplace for cities to be classified according to their size. Qualifying them as small, medium, or large is a social practice that concerns the subject's relationship with space. To define not only the size but the dynamics that engender the small town, it is necessary to analyze its regional insertion and the modifications that occur in the urban space from this, as well as the consequences of the refunctionalization processes in the wake of urbanization, evaluating what remains and what is changed in the urban characteristics of small towns. To carry out this analysis, we used as our field of study the municipality of Piraúba, located in the Zona da Mata of Minas Gerais. It is a local center, according to REGIC (2020). It is inserted in the divisions: the Intermediate Geographic Region of Juiz de Fora, in the Immediate Geographic Region of Ubá and is part of the Local Productive Arrangement, focused on furniture production. This work has as its main objective to reflect on the impact of the region on the economic performance and urban development of the small town. The study proves the debates about how the role of cities, when organized in a network, reverberates in its socioeconomic dimension in view of how Piraúba is both a small town polarized by larger centers and part of productive processes that grant it a polarizing force in relation to other small towns in its surroundings.

KEYWORDS: Small town, regional insertion, economic dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

It is commonplace for cities to be understood based on their size. Qualifying them as small, medium, or large is a social practice that concerns the subject's relationship with space. This perception of space is crossed by the several dynamics established in its territory, and there is a scientific effort to understand them and, based on them, to draw classificatory guidelines.

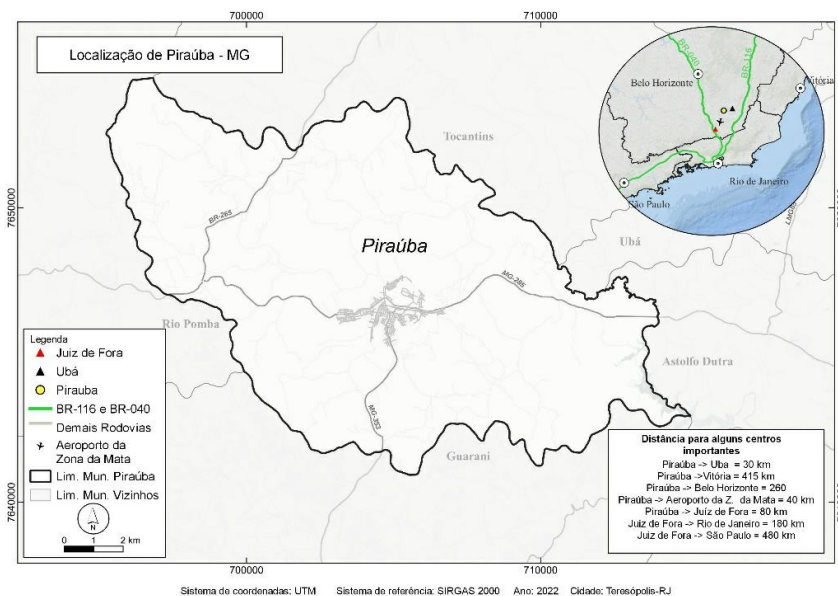
The research in relation to small towns deals with the possibilities of classification, understanding that, with the diversity of municipalities that make up our country, conceptualizing a city exceeds the adjectives small, medium, and large and conditions more complex debates.

It cannot be denied that quantitative data, such as population and territorial size, are relevant questions for its characterization, mainly due to the fact that demographic dynamics is a reflection of other aspects that engender it. Moreira Junior (2014) points out that along with this predominant characteristic, one should analyze "the geographical location; the roles played in the urban network; its relations with other cities and with the countryside; and the territorial structure of the city" (p.44-45).

With this in mind, it is necessary that, in order to define not only the size but the dynamics that occur in a small town, it is necessary to analyze its regional insertion and the modifications of the urban space that result from this, as well as what is maintained as characteristic of the small town and what is changed to the detriment of a productive refunctionalization consequent to the urbanization of these small municipalities.

To perform this analysis, the municipality of Piraúba, located in the Zona da Mata of Minas Gerais, was used as the field of study. The town has a population of about 8,800 people, and the municipality has 10,862 inhabitants, and is characterized as a local center, according to REGIC (2020). In the division established by IBGE (2017), the city is inserted in the Intermediate Geographic Region of Juiz de Fora, in the Immediate Geographic Region of Ubá, and is part of the Local Productive Arrangement of Ubá, focused on furniture production (figure 1).

Figure 1: Location of the municipality and the urban network of Piraúba-MG



Prepared by: Francisco Carlos Moreira Gomes (2022).

Piraúba developed from an agricultural economy, a trend of the occupation in the Zona da Mata region of Minas Gerais, land of farms that were dedicated to the cultivation of polycultures. However, the lack of profitability in agriculture since the 1960s and the failure to invest in small producers-exemplified by the general results of PRODEMATA¹-ended up reducing the cultivation areas, which became from pastures to part of the urban perimeter.

The rural character of the municipality changed between 1980 and 1990. This loss of dynamism of the primary sector, experienced in Piraúba, is characteristic of small towns where, many times, the urbanization process refunctionalizes the production of these localities. Piraúba went through this movement, first with prominence in the tertiary sector, in the retail of clothing and bedding, and, later, with the installation of industries in the city, which occurred both from investments in the region to leverage the sector, as in the creation and planning of the APL furniture factory in Ubá, from the 1990s.

The evolution of properly urban sectors and functional specialization, along with the decline of the agricultural sector and the evasion from the countryside, changed from the 1990s on the distribution of the municipality's population, which caused rural exodus either to the district headquarters or to other cities.

Regarding this subject, the main objective of this work is to reflect on the impact of the region on the economic performance and urban development of the small town. The field of study, Piraúba, is identified as a small town for this purpose. The region is approached from

¹ Between 1976 and 1985, "PRODEMATA," among the special programs for the development of agriculture in Minas Gerais, was the first integrated program, proposed at the level of a state, to receive external financing from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). The program aimed to recover and revitalize the agricultural economy of the region, which was in a process of decay and economic emptiness, especially from the policy of eradication of coffee plantations and also because of the prevalence of a large concentration of small producers (BDMG, 2000, p.26-27).

the perspective of economic dynamics and changes, and some political guidelines in the municipal, state, and federal spheres are examined.

In order to carry out this study, it was necessary to review the literature related to the conceptualization of small towns; collect secondary data about the Zona da Mata region and its subdivisions of interest in the study; and carry out field research to collect primary and secondary data from the municipality of Piraúba.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The town of Piraúba is considered by its residents to be a small town, slow and not very developed. However, when compared to its neighbor, Guarani, they consider that trade and industry give the town a more developed economy and the possibility of growth. The studies carried out in the municipality corroborate the view of its residents because, despite presenting the characteristics of a small town-like its neighbor Guarani-there is an economic dynamic that complexifies its classification.

To classify the city of Piraúba, the first variable considered was the population contingent, in view of the fact that this is the characteristic that is most taken into account when ranking cities. Corrêa (2011) establishes that a small town has a population of between 20 and 30 thousand. Bacelar (2012) uses a limit of 10 thousand and, if we take into account the characterization of local centers², the average population by REGIC is 12.5 thousand inhabitants. The population of the municipality of Piraúba in the last census (2010) was 10,862 inhabitants, and 8,814 in the urban area.

Another variable is the presence and relationship of rurality in the urban space. Wanderley (2001), when analyzing the small cities of Pernambuco, deals with issues directly related to the rural world, such as: the coexistence relations among residents; the way urbanization occurs slowly; the maintenance of cultural habits of the rural world; and the relationship between the inhabited space and the landscape.

Rodrigues (2014), when proposing a new methodology for classifying urban centers, bases his research on how much the rural world is present in the contemporary constitution of the city, taking into consideration the demographic and economic structure and the territorial dynamics. We can relate such a methodology to the fact of the countryside/city division and that the more urban functions are performed in a municipal seat, the more the city tends to be urbanized.

In the case of Piraúba, despite performing properly urban functions, the secondary and tertiary sectors being the main sources of municipal GDP and the population being mostly urban, the aspects of rurality brought by Wanderley (2001) are characteristic of its territory, configuring the city as "not so urban".

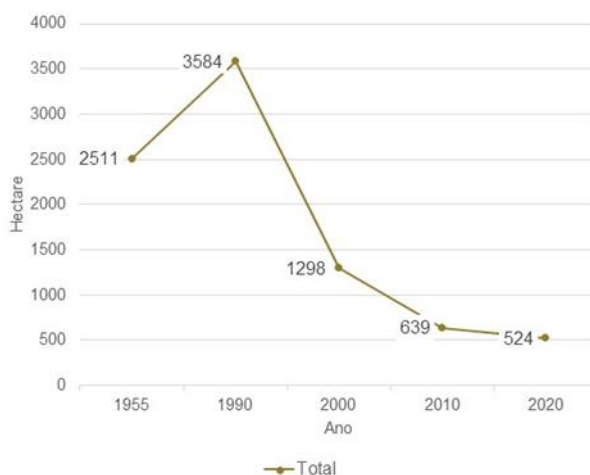
² The classification adopted by REGIC-IBGE in the hierarchization of centers concerns: "Cities that exert influence restricted to their own territorial limits, being able to attract some of the resident population of other cities for specific subjects, but not being the main destination of any other city." Simultaneously, Local Centers present weak centrality in their business and public management activities, generally having other urban centers of higher hierarchy as a reference for daily shopping and service activities of their population, as well as access to public power activities and business dynamics." (IBGE, 2020, p.13).

Like many cities in Mata Mineira, the first occupations in what today comprises the urban space of Piraúba occurred from the installation of a farm inserted into a "sesmaria". The donation of the lands that today comprise the municipality dates from the year 1810. The village was formed on the lands of Bom Jardim Farm in the year 1851 (CONDÉ, 1995). Only in 1889-79 years after the donation of the sesmaria-the first roads were opened, and only in 1953 the district was emancipated from the city of Rio Pomba and formed its first neighborhoods. Its history shows the slow urbanization process, which is related to the fact that the territory was founded on rural productive bases, of late urbanization and industrialization.

Starting in the 1990s, we were able to observe the economic and social change in the municipality, influenced by regional dynamics. Agricultural production, already declining, ended up even more weakened after the end of the PRODEMATA project, which, according to Soares (2019), did not correspond with the local reality and ended up not benefiting small producers, the majority in the region.

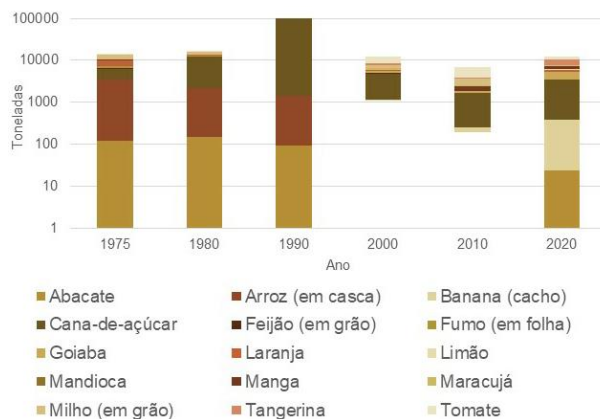
In Piraúba, in the same period, the cultivated areas were drastically reduced, and even after the 2000s, when there was an increase in diversity in agricultural production, the decrease in production is clear and can be illustrated by the following figures (figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Total area planted or harvested (1955-2020)



Source: SIDRA, IBGE. Prepared by the author

Figure 3: Production of vegetable origin (in tons)



Source: SIDRA, IBGE. Prepared by the author.

Moreover, the 1990s were a watershed for the Zona da Mata in view of the fact that many companies were implanted in the region, promoting, especially, the food and textile segments. Specifically, in the immediate region of Ubá, the secondary sector emerged, and, as of 1980, part of the region was established as a Local Productive Arrangement focused on furniture production³. Of the 17 cities that make up the Immediate Region of Ubá, 8 are part of the APL, one of them being Piraúba (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Municipalities integrating APL-Ubá



Source: "UNIR PARA CRESCER: INSTITUTIONS, SPACE AND ECONOMIC GROWTH IN THE MOVEAL INDUSTRY OF UBÁ, MINAS GERAIS". Prepared by: Antônio Oliveira Júnior, 2011, adapted from FJP.

The APL was established in the 1990s, with the first Furniture Fair of Minas Gerais (FEMUR) in 1994, the installation of the Sebrae Branch in 1995, and with the creation of the Development Agency of Ubá and Region (ADUBAR). In 2004, the Development Forum of the Ubá Furniture Complex was initiated, as manager of the productive arrangement and, along with it, the planning of the productive arrangement (OLIVEIRA JÚNIOR, 2011).

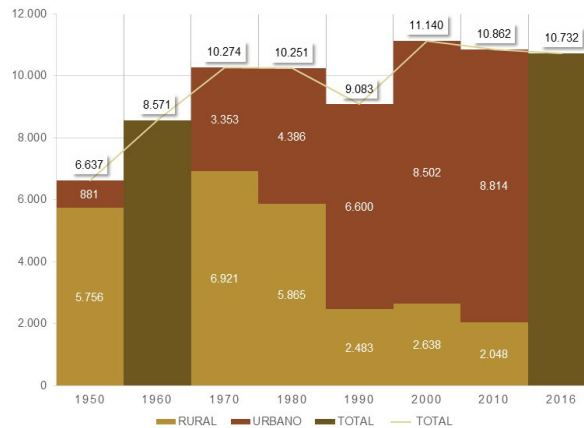
All these changes in the regional economy have impacted the city so that a process of productive specialization focused on industry can be observed in the mid-1990s. This can be verified in the historical bibliography of the city and contrasted with economic data, which highlights the importance of the tertiary sector—retail clothing—and, with the establishment of industries in the city, reinforced by the planning of the APL furniture of Ubá, the evolution of the secondary sector.

This change in functions has also had consequences for the demographic structure of the municipality. A reduction in the rural population is observed at the expense of a reduction

³ In this industrial case, it refers to agglomerations of economic activities that establish "networked relationships between companies and other institutions" as a result of a concentration of related productions—as is the case of the furniture sector—in the search for joint mobilization in favor of training, solutions, meeting demands, and development of the highlighted sector (OLIVEIRA JÚNIOR, 2011, p.02; ALBINO et. al., 2008).

in the total population contingent and an increase in the number of inhabitants in the urban area (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Population structure between 1950 and 2016



Source: SIDRA and MUNIC, IBGE. Prepared by the author.

Corrêa (2011), when dealing with these changes in small Brazilian cities-productive refunctionalization and restructuring of trade-conditions them to the decentralizing policy, the spatial division of labor, and the new dynamics of flows of both goods and people. The author points out that from this point on, small cities start to be differentiated by their economic dynamics, as opposed to the little differentiation that was previously made of them.

This specialization, or productive refunctionalization, also differentiates the small cities when inserted into the urban network and the types of flows established between them and other centers. While Corrêa (2011) pointed out that small towns are characterized as "local centers," a year earlier, Fresca (2010) pointed out the risk of generalizing them as such, since, according to the author, some cities have a tendency to

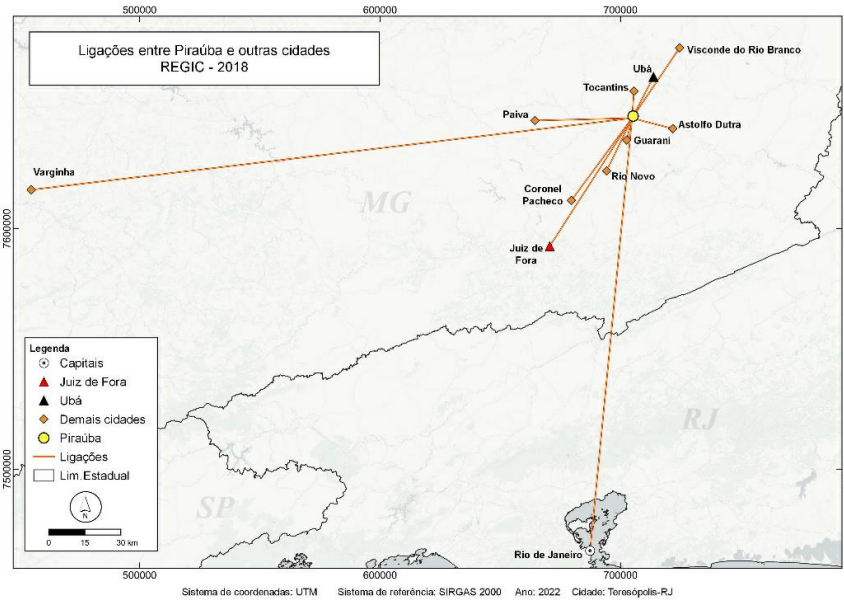
“complexity of urban activities exceeds the so-called minimum level. But this does not generate the necessary elements for them to be considered intermediate cities or metropolises, meaning that even though they have some complexity of urban activities above the minimum level, they are still small. And here lies the reason for the use of the expression small town for those cities that are not local centers” (FRESCA, 2010, p. 77).

What the author questions about this classification is related to what Sposito (2010) addresses about the organization of flows in the urban network. According to the author, it is possible to observe connections vertically—from small centers to medium centers and from these to large centers—horizontally between centers of the same dynamics and transversally, as, for example, small cities in the interior of São Paulo connect to the capital. These connections are a consequence of the spatial division of labor, which inserts small cities into a capital production circuit linking them with cities of different sizes and regions.

In the case study at hand, Piraúba, according to REGIC (2018), is considered a "local center". However, centrality establishes flows and exerts urban functions that end up polarizing small neighboring municipalities. In terms of production as a furniture hub, the city specializes

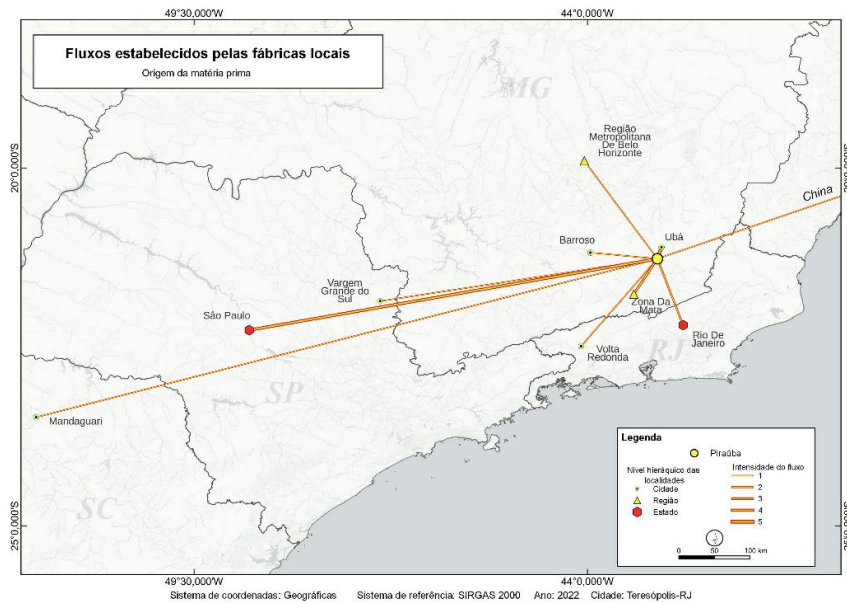
in upholstery and also presents other ramifications in the industrial sector, such as the production of galvanized and textiles. In consultation with some of the local companies, it was possible to identify the flows, and consequently the networks, between the city and other centers. When compared to what is defined by REGIC, a much richer dynamic of connections is observed (figures 6, 7 and 8).

Figure 6 - Connections between Pirauá and other cities (REGIC, 2018)



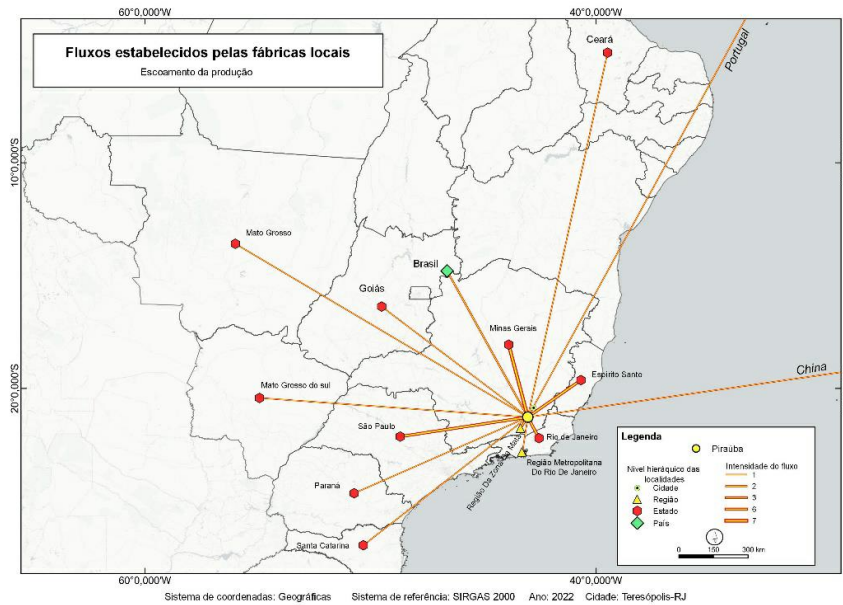
Source: REGIC (2018), IBGE. Elaboration: Francisco Carlos Moreira Gomes.

Figure 7 - Flow of raw material acquired by local industries



Source: Data collection with local industries. Prepared by: Francisco Carlos Moreira Gomes.

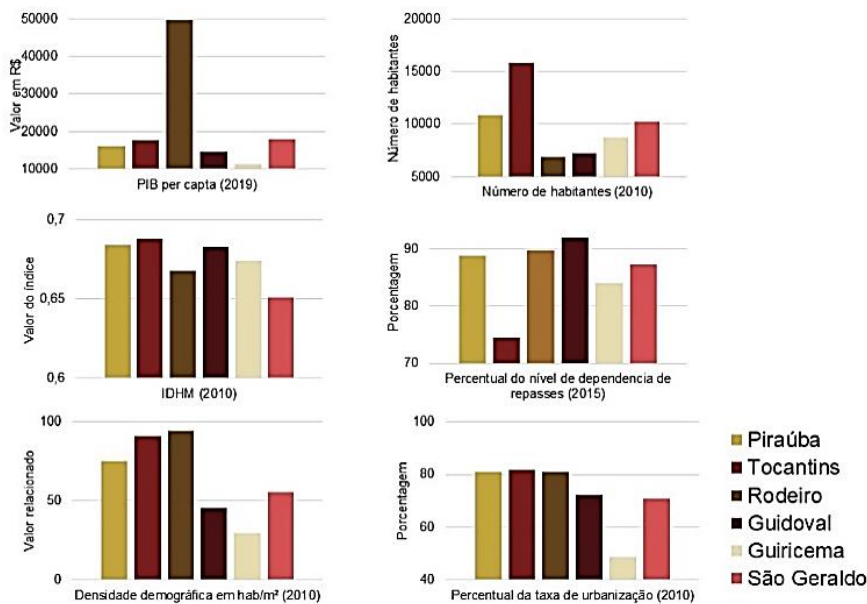
Figure 8 - Production flow of local industries



Source: Data collection with local industries. Prepared by: Francisco Carlos Moreira Gomes.

Therefore, when we consider the economic complexities and the impacts of the regional dynamics, including how the urban/rural relationship will unfold from this, we have these differentiations that generate typologies of small cities. This occurs even within the productive organization itself, as is the case of the small cities that are part of the APL furniture industry in Ubá (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Socio-economic indicators of APL Ubá's small towns



Source: Cities, IBGE. Elaboration: author.

When dealing with production issues, the differences between small towns and the ability to establish typologies become evident. This is related to the way capitalism appropriates and exploits a certain city; how the productive dynamics will insert it into the economic circuit.

When we deal with the spatiality of the small town itself, the general characteristics that compose it become evident. The presence of rurality in Piraúba, for example, is manifested in the natural landscape conjugated to the urban fabric (figure 10) and the traces of rurality that are imbued in the production of urban space (figure 11).

Source: Personal archive, Ana Djéssika Vidal.



Figure 11: Orchard and chicken in house in the center of Piraúba, 2022



Source: Personal archive, Agda França.

Na expansão da cidade em Piraúba pode ser observado o avanço do tecido urbano sobre propriedades rurais. Como o processo de urbanização é lento, a cidade é composta, em sua zona periférica, por formas rurais de apropriação da terra. A expansão da porção leste da cidade, no bairro Granja Aurimar, evidencia essa forma de urbanização (figuras 12 e 13).

Figure 13: Granja Aurimar neighborhood in 2010



Source: Captured by Google Earth.

Figure 12: Granja Aurimar neighborhood in 2020



Source: Captured by Google Earth.

Another characteristic that concerns small cities is their dependence on government transfers as their main source of revenue. This is often justified by the low economic dynamism of these federal units. Even if Piraúba has become functionally specialized, its dependence on government transfers reaches 88%, according to the IBGE, an average value if we compare it with other cities in the Ubá productive cluster.

The low tax revenue reflects the investment possibilities that the municipalities have. Even if the governmental decentralization process resulted in high investments in municipal development, the expenses for administrative machine maintenance are much higher than these applications (CARVALHO, 2000).

The city management has as its focus investments in education and health policies and does not present an administration focused on the development of the several sectorial policies. Besides, there is in these cities, and Piraúba is no exception, a governance based on a clientelistic culture and a "generalized belief among mayors that plans do not work in a small municipality" (CARVALHO, 2000, p.49).

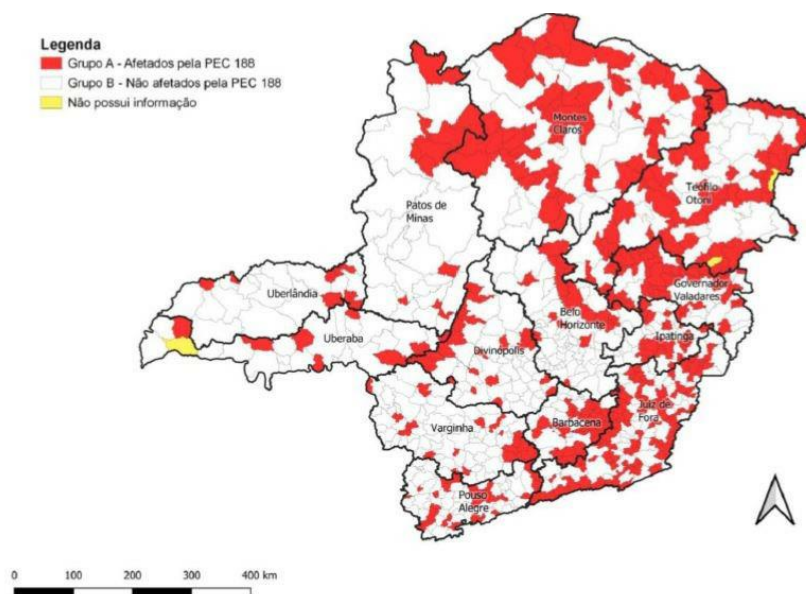
The financial issues of small municipalities are one of the flaws in the management of these territories. This involves not only a municipal problem, but all governmental spheres, considering that it was after the 1988 Constitution that municipalization came into effect, with

the intention of ensuring "greater financial independence, better quality of services provided, and greater attention to the monitoring and control of actions in the social field" (CARVALHO, 2000, p.49-50).

However, ensuring the autonomy of small municipalities involves management complexities both in the economic sphere and in the local political capacity: professional level of public servants, popular participation in decisions, inefficient legislative apparatus, and decisions taken based on "managerial personalism" (BACELAR, 2012).

In 30 years, the federal government moved from an emancipationist decentralizing policy—with the 1988 Constitution—to the proposal of the extinction of small municipalities, having as justification the economic unsustainability and the unbalance in public finances, with the PEC of the Federative Pact. ⁴In Minas Gerais, about 49.9% of the municipalities would be in the sights of the PEC, according to the 2019 newsletter of the João Pinheiro Foundation (figure 14).

Figure 14: Municipalities subject to extinction due to the criteria of Constitutional Amendment Proposal # 188/2019 - 2017 - Minas Gerais



Source: INFORMATIVO FJP. Belo Horizonte: João Pinheiro Foundation. Statistics and Information Directorate. Public Finance: Extinction of Municipalities by PEC 188/2019. NO. 4. 2019.

This political action goes against what should be thought in terms of the management of municipalities. According to Endlich & Marques (2021), it makes one question the viability of the capacity of small cities and their municipalities to guarantee the possibility of "social reproduction." It belittles the local scale and devalues it. Even though most Brazilian

⁴ A set of economic reforms proposed by Paulo Guedes One of them was the extinction of small municipalities with up to 5,000 inhabitants that do not have the capacity to collect a minimum of 10% of their revenues by mid-2023, and these would be incorporated into other more dynamic municipalities in January 2025 (ENDLICH & MARQUES, 2021).

municipalities have low population levels, it is clear that, once again, these are treated as a problem for the economic development of the country and, as a problem, they should be extinguished.

Within the furniture APL, only one city has a dependency higher than 90%: Guidoal, and, more recently, Tabuleiro. The population decrease is a reality in both. But what we must reflect is how, even inserted in a productive circuit of prominence, the small cities of the arrangement express high demand for external transfers? Something that may be related to the decentralization, or not, of both the productive and reproductive processes (commerce, educational institutions, events, and companies that are attracted by the arrangement) of APL.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study proves the debates about how the role of cities, when organized into productive networks, reverberates in its socioeconomic dimension in light of how Piraúba is interpreted not only as a small town polarized by larger centers, but also that it is part of productive processes that ensure its prominence in relation to other small towns in its surroundings.

This attribution of roles is a result of the developments in the region where the city is inserted, mainly due to the productive specialization promoted by the local productive arrangement of Ubá and the industrialization process of the Zona da Mata region of Minas Gerais. Furthermore, it is worth noting how this region suffered as a result of changes in agricultural production and failed investments in the area, resulting in a surplus of cheap labor and the redirection of capital to the secondary and tertiary sectors.

The Piraubano context goes against the discourse of decadence that accompanies the debate about small Brazilian cities, which corroborates that proposals such as the PEC of the Federative Pact see in the extinction of small municipalities a plausible guideline to equalize the distribution of revenues of the Union. This fact absolves the state of responsibility for ensuring the development of all of its federative entities and reinforces the centralization of public management while determining who is entitled to public investments.

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