Regions in Transition. Transformative Capacities in Smaller Towns Under Regional Aspects

Prof. Dr. Agnes Förster
AESOP Small Towns Lecture Series, 10.11.2025

Small Medium-Sized Towns in Germany

Graduate College 2020-2024
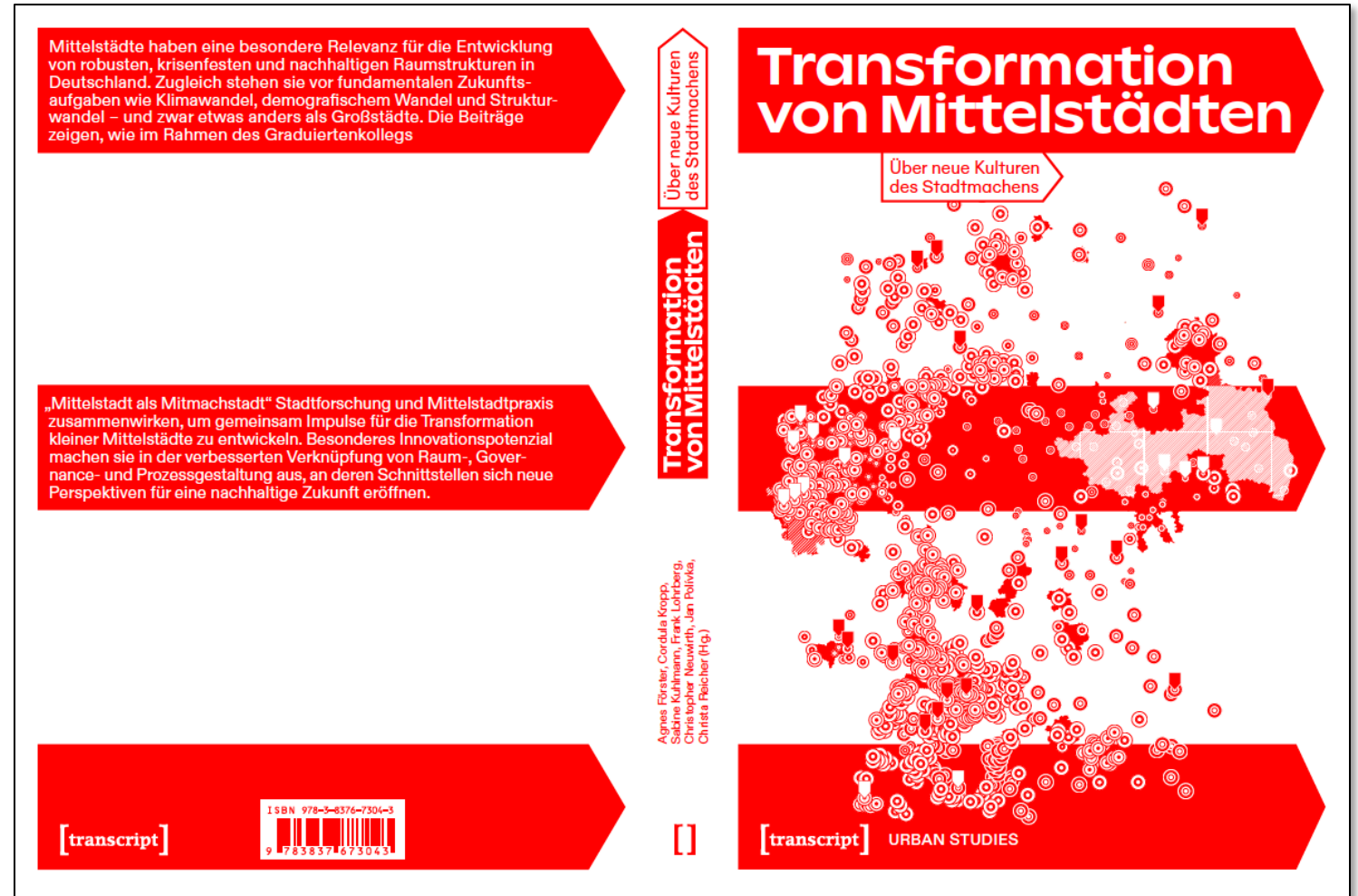https://www.mittelstadtalsmitmachstadt.de

Founded by the Robert Bosch Stiftung

RWTH Aachen University
University of Potsdam
University of Stuttgart
TU Berlin

Publication: Transformation von Mittelstädten

Mittelstädte haben eine besondere Relevanz für die Entwicklung von robusten, krisenfesten und nachhaltigen Raumstrukturen in Deutschland. Zugleich stehen sie vor fundamentalen Zukunfts-aufgaben wie Klimawandel, demografischem Wandel und Struktur-wandel – und zwar etwas anders als Großstädte. Die Beiträge zeigen, wie im Rahmen des Graduiertenkollegs

„Mittelstadt als Mitmachstadt" Stadtforschung und Mittelstadtpraxis zusammenwirken, um gemeinsam Impulse für die Transformation kleiner Mittelstädte zu entwickeln. Besonderes Innovationspotenzial machen sie in der verbesserten Verknüpfung von Raum-, Gover-nance- und Prozessgestaltung aus, an deren Schnittstellen sich neue Perspektiven für eine nachhaltige Zukunft eröffnen.

Transformation von Mittelstädten

Über neue Kulturen des Stadtmachens

Agnes Förster, Cordula Kropp, Sabine Kuhlmann, Frank Lohrberg, Christopher Neuwirth, Jan Polivka, Christa Reicher (Hg.)

ISBN 978-3-8376-7304-3

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[transcript] URBAN STUDIES

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Small Medium-Sized Towns in Germany

Inter- and transdisciplinary research approach

Constitutive for the research group is the triad of spatial, governance, and process-related research perspectives on medium-sized cities, which combines the planning and design disciplines of architecture, landscape architecture, and urban planning with sociology, political science, and administrative science.
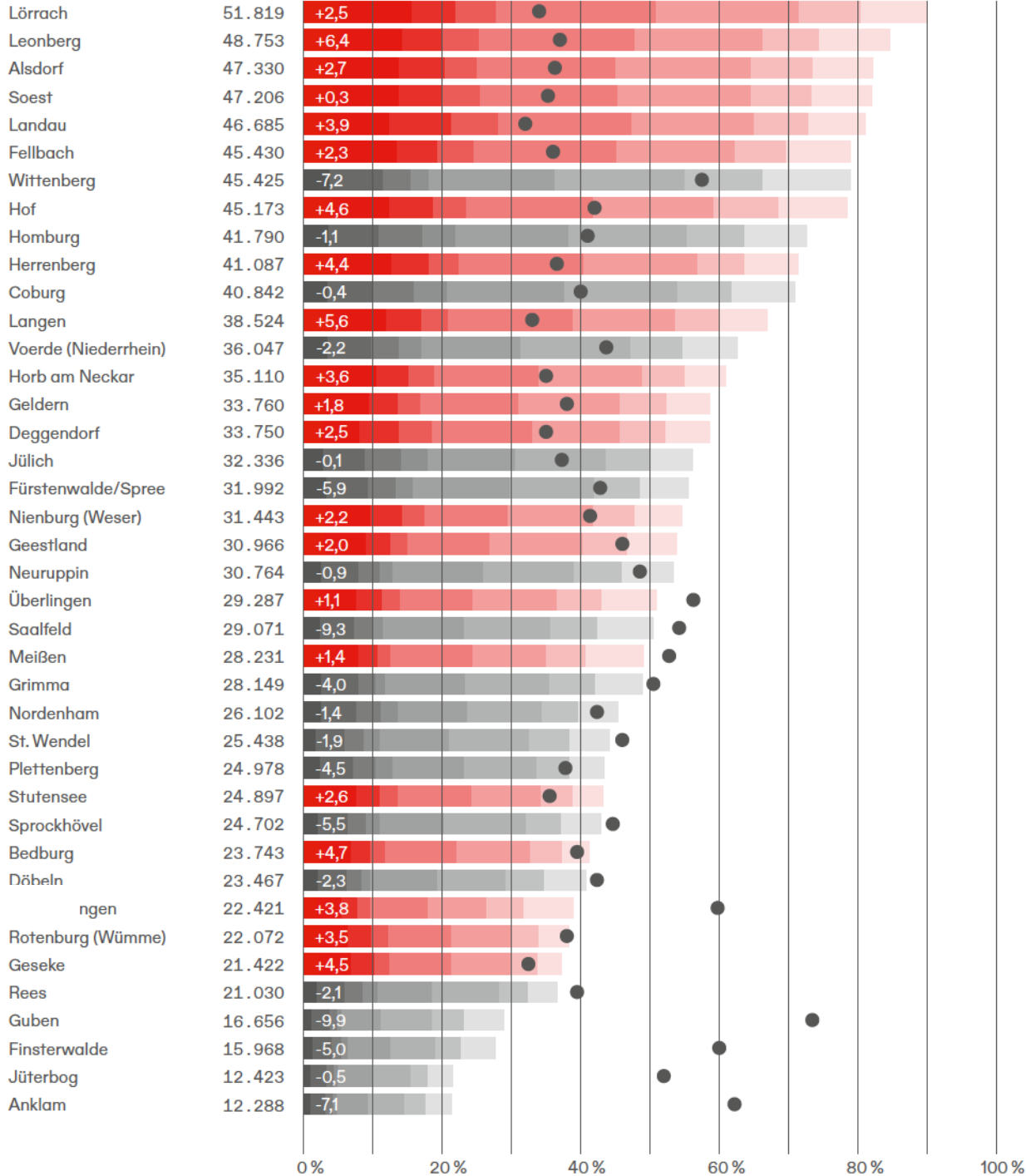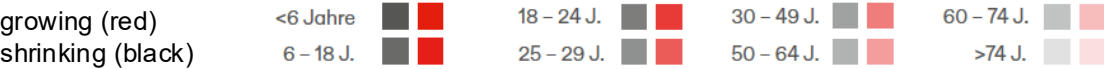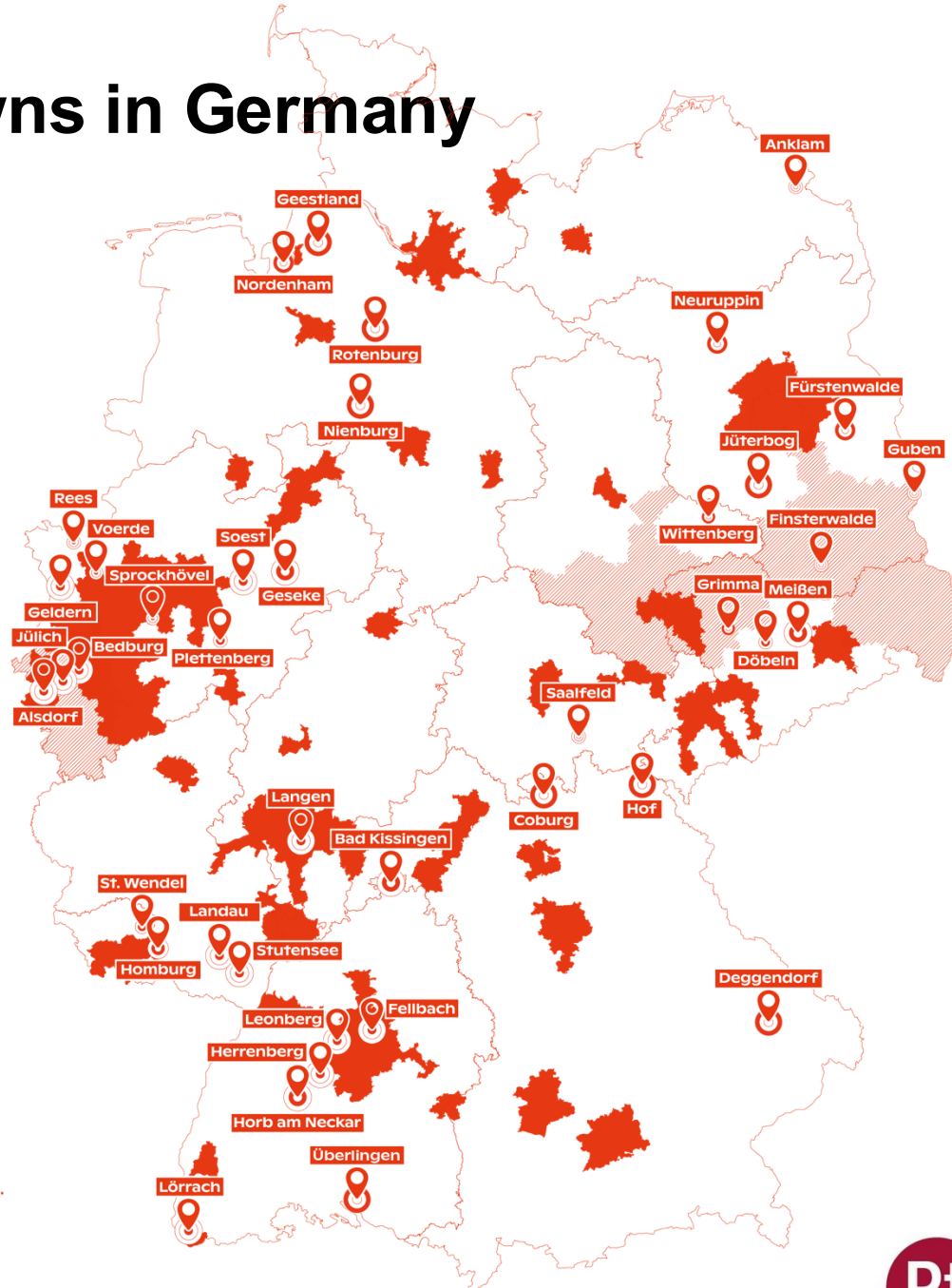
Medium-Sized Towns Network

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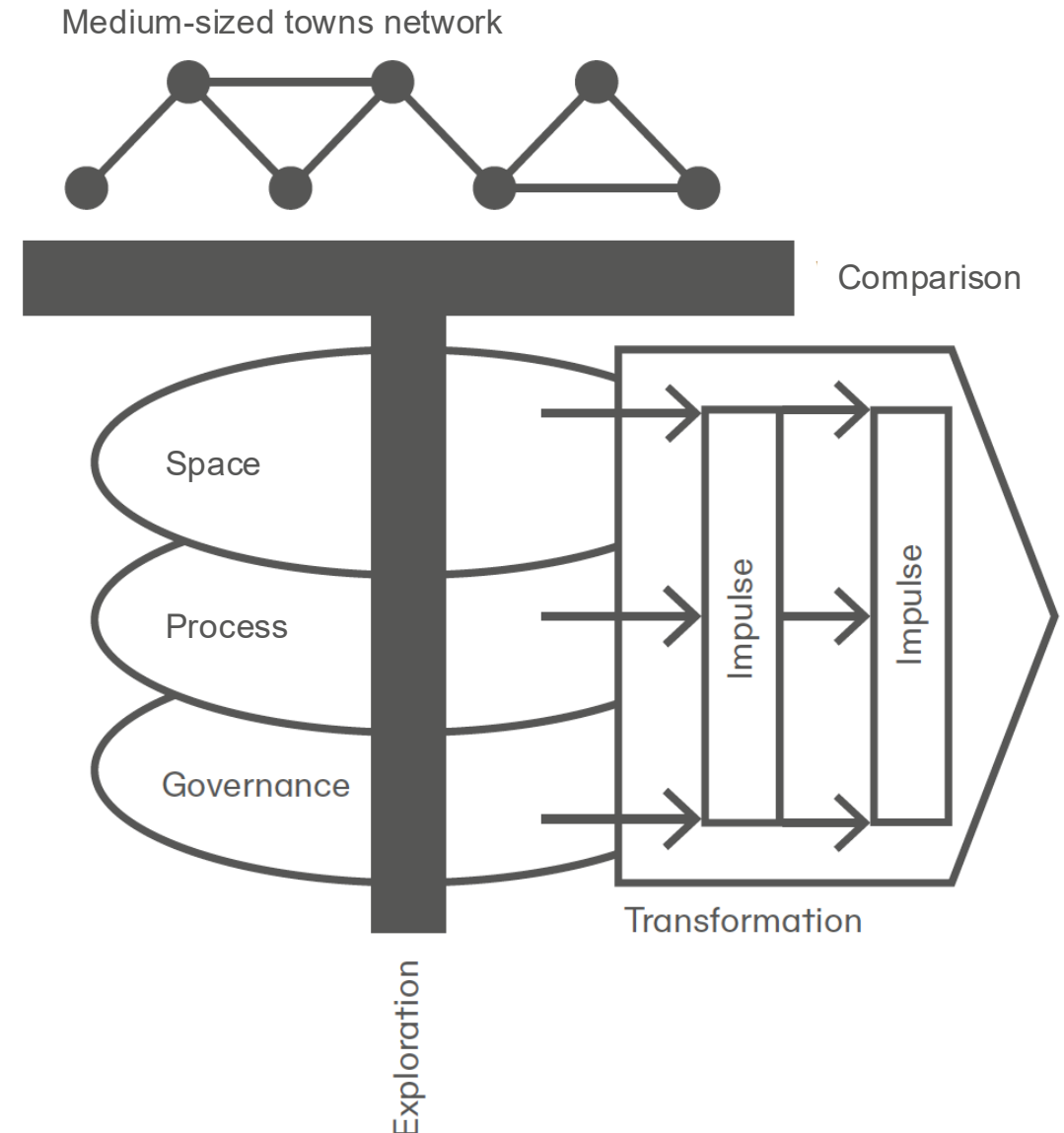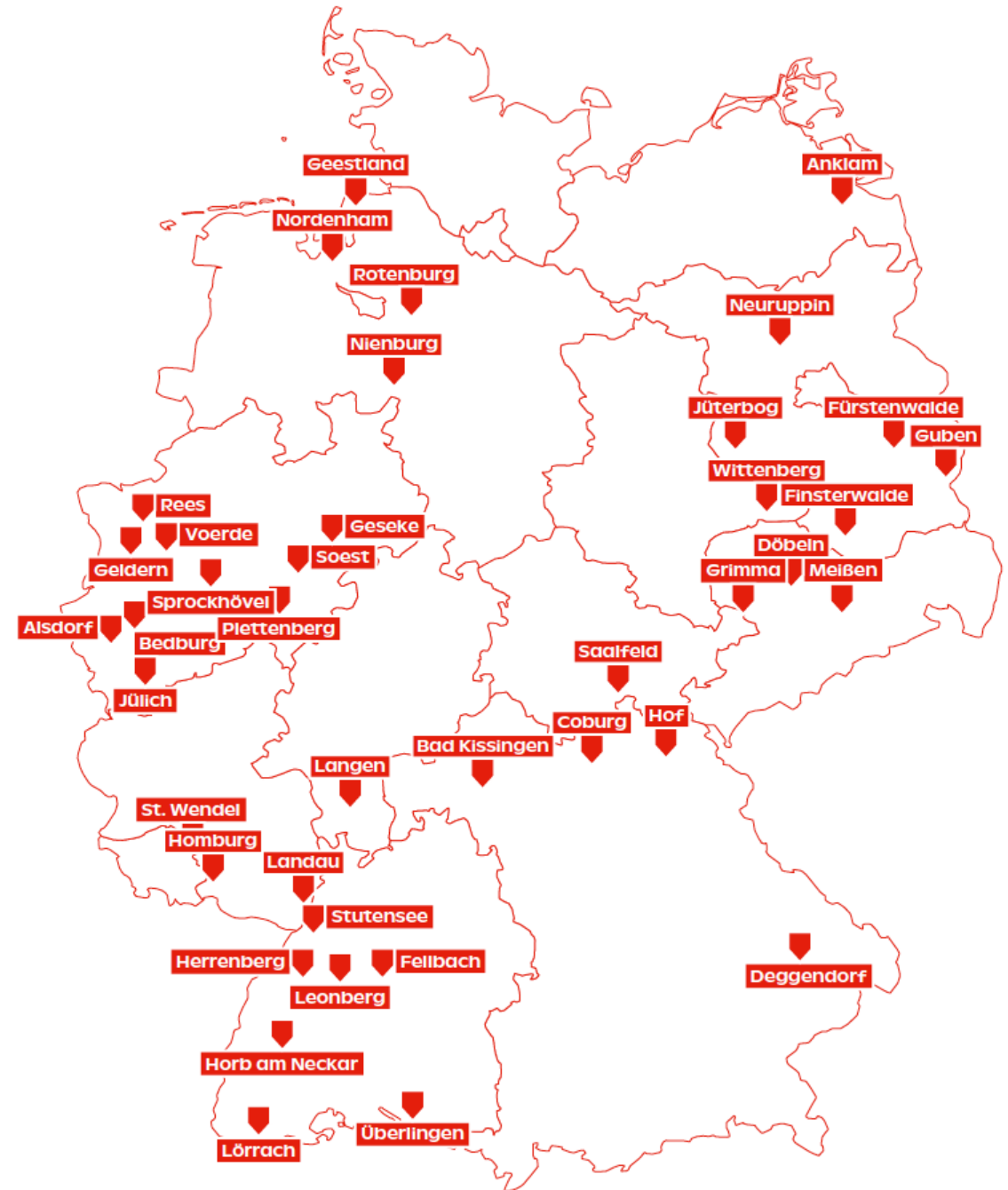
Medium-Sized Towns Network

Comparison of population and demographic trends in medium-sized towns belonging to the Medium-Sized Towns Network.

Förster et al. 2024

Age ratio 2020 (people aged 65 and over per 100 people aged 20–64)

growing (red)
shrinking (black)

| <6 Jahre | 18 – 24 J. | 30 – 49 J. | 60 – 74 J. |
| 6 – 18 J. | 25 – 29 J. | 50 – 64 J. | >74 J. |

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Town	Population	Change
Lörrach	51.819	+2,5
Leonberg	48.753	+6,4
Alsdorf	47.330	+2,7
Soest	47.206	+0,3
Landau	46.685	+3,9
Fellbach	45.430	+2,3
Wittenberg	45.425	-7,2
Hof	45.173	+4,6
Homburg	41.790	-1,1
Herrenberg	41.087	+4,4
Coburg	40.842	-0,4
Langen	38.524	+5,6
Voerde (Niederrhein)	36.047	-2,2
Horb am Neckar	35.110	+3,6
Geldern	33.760	+1,8
Deggendorf	33.750	+2,5
Jülich	32.336	-0,1
Fürstenwalde/Spree	31.992	-5,9
Nienburg (Weser)	31.443	+2,2
Geestland	30.966	+2,0
Neuruppin	30.764	-0,9
Überlingen	29.287	+1,1
Saalfeld	29.071	-9,3
Meißen	28.231	+1,4
Grimma	28.149	-4,0
Nordenham	26.102	-1,4
St. Wendel	25.438	-1,9
Plettenberg	24.978	-4,5
Stutensee	24.897	+2,6
Sprockhövel	24.702	-5,5
Bedburg	23.743	+4,7
Döbeln	23.467	-2,3
...ngen	22.421	+3,8
Rotenburg (Wümme)	22.072	+3,5
Geseke	21.422	+4,5
Rees	21.030	-2,1
Guben	16.656	-9,9
Finsterwalde	15.968	-5,0
Jüterbog	12.423	-0,5
Anklam	12.288	-7,1

Small Medium-Sized Towns in Germany

Town type (location)
- ◉ very central
- ◉ central
- ◉ peripheral
- ◎ very peripheral

Town type (settlement)
- predominantly urban
- partially urban
- predominantly rural

Inhabitants
- ◯ (above average) growth
- ◯ stable population
- ◯ (above average) decline

- 📍 medium-sized towns network
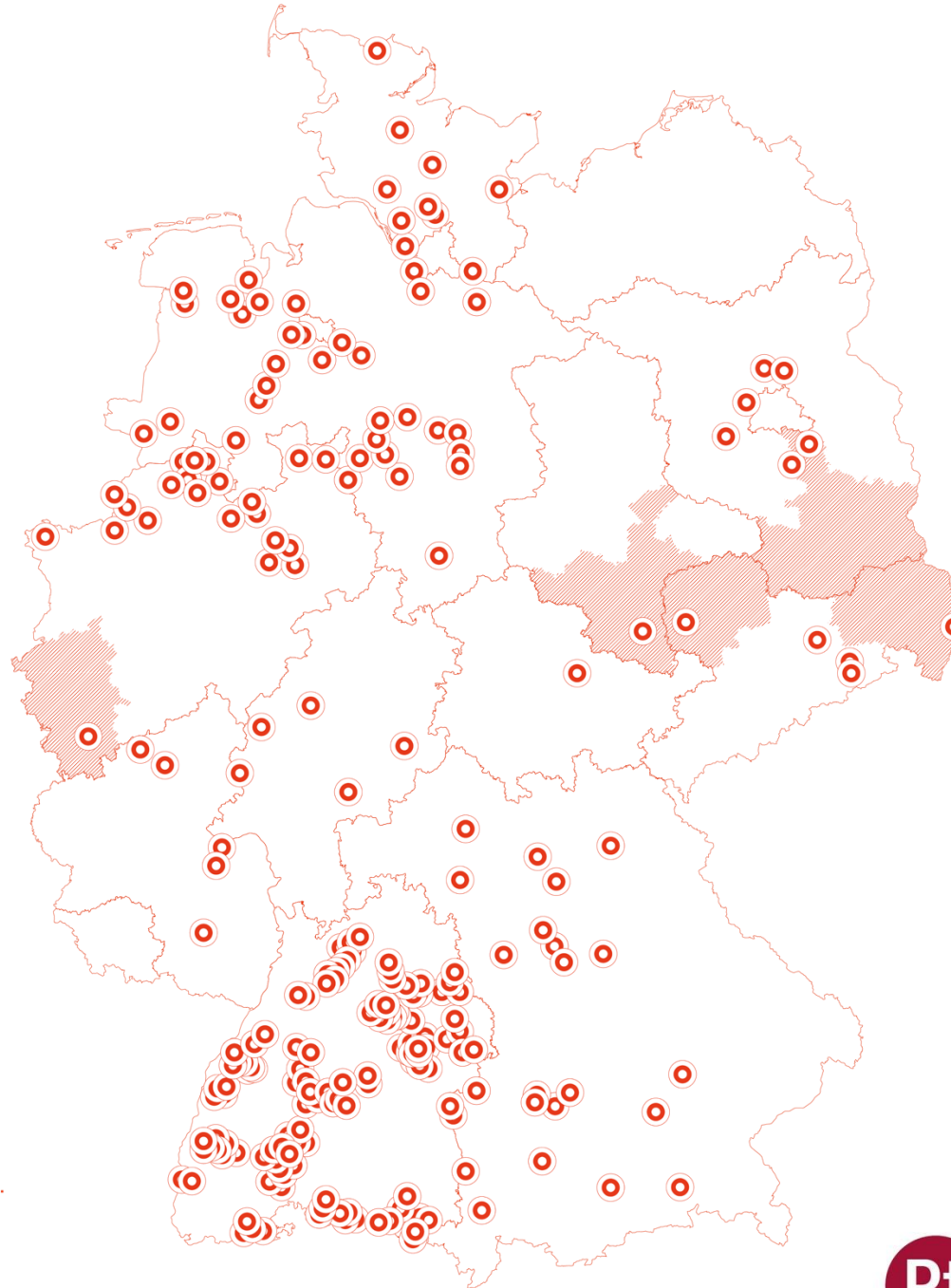- ▨ mining region
- ■ agglomeration area

Quelle: Städte- und Gemeindedaten aus der Übersicht der Raumabgrenzungen des BBSR.

highly central
high growth

Town type (location)
- ◉ very central
- ◉ central
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peripheral
high growth

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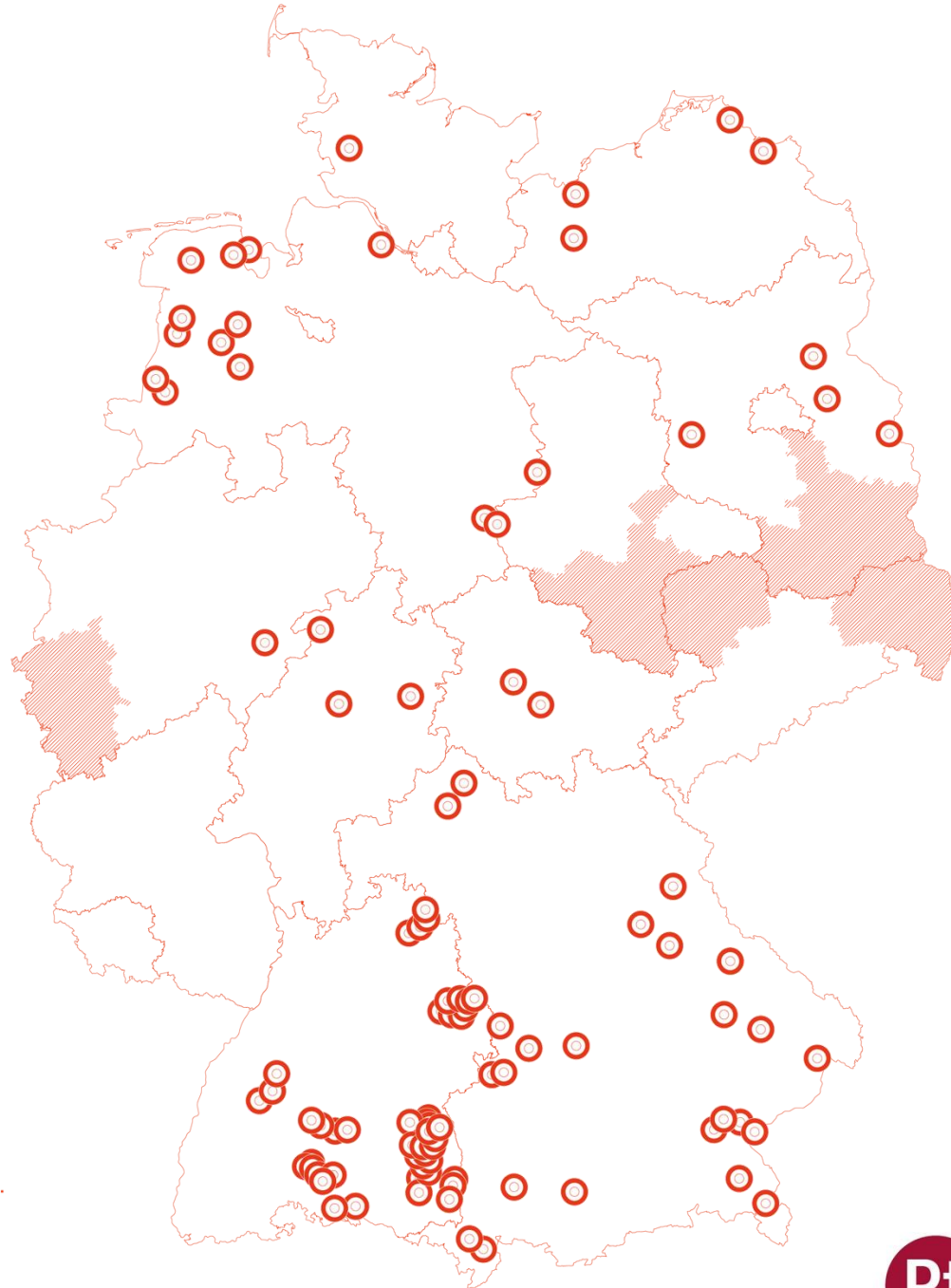- mining region
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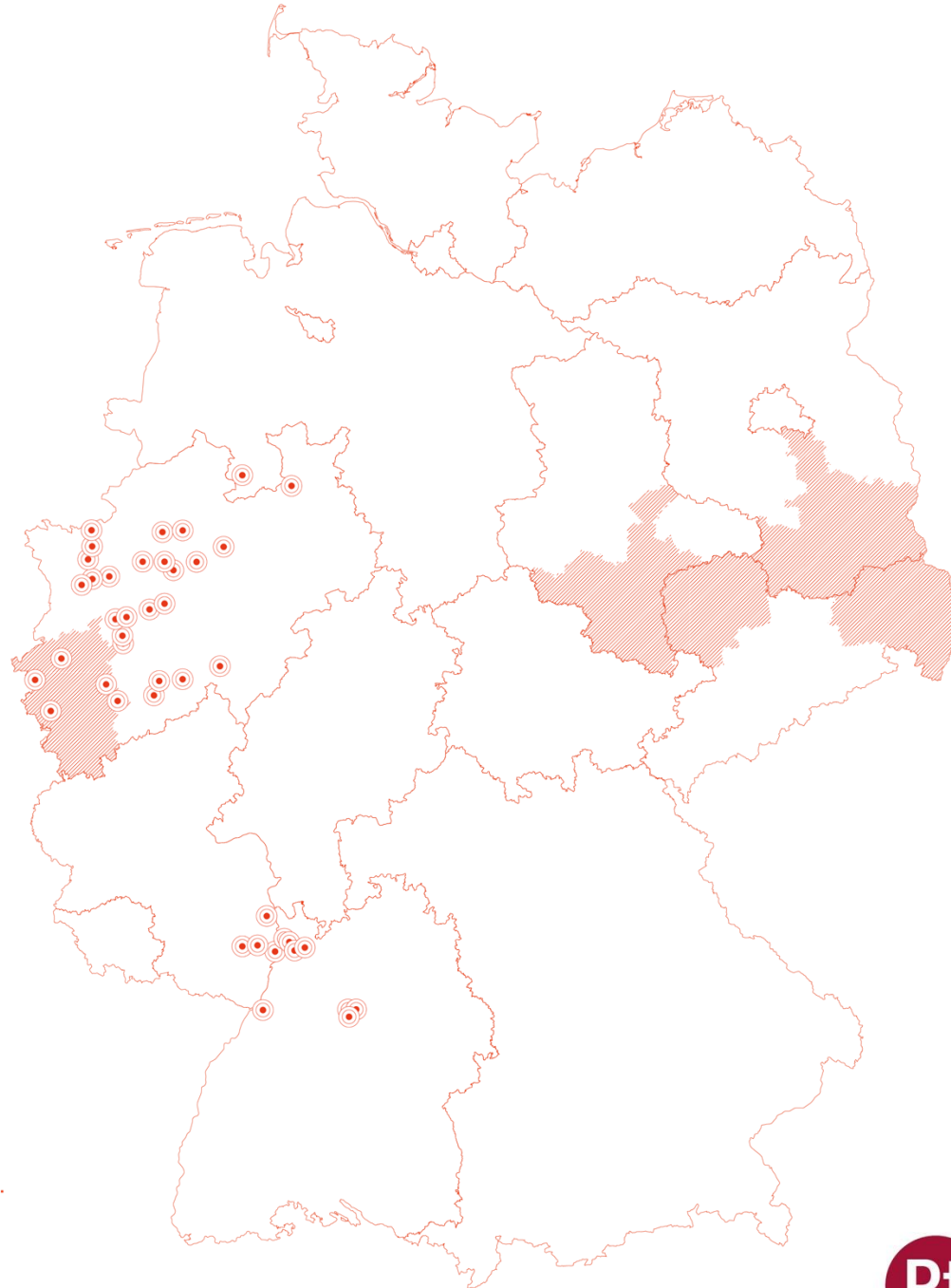
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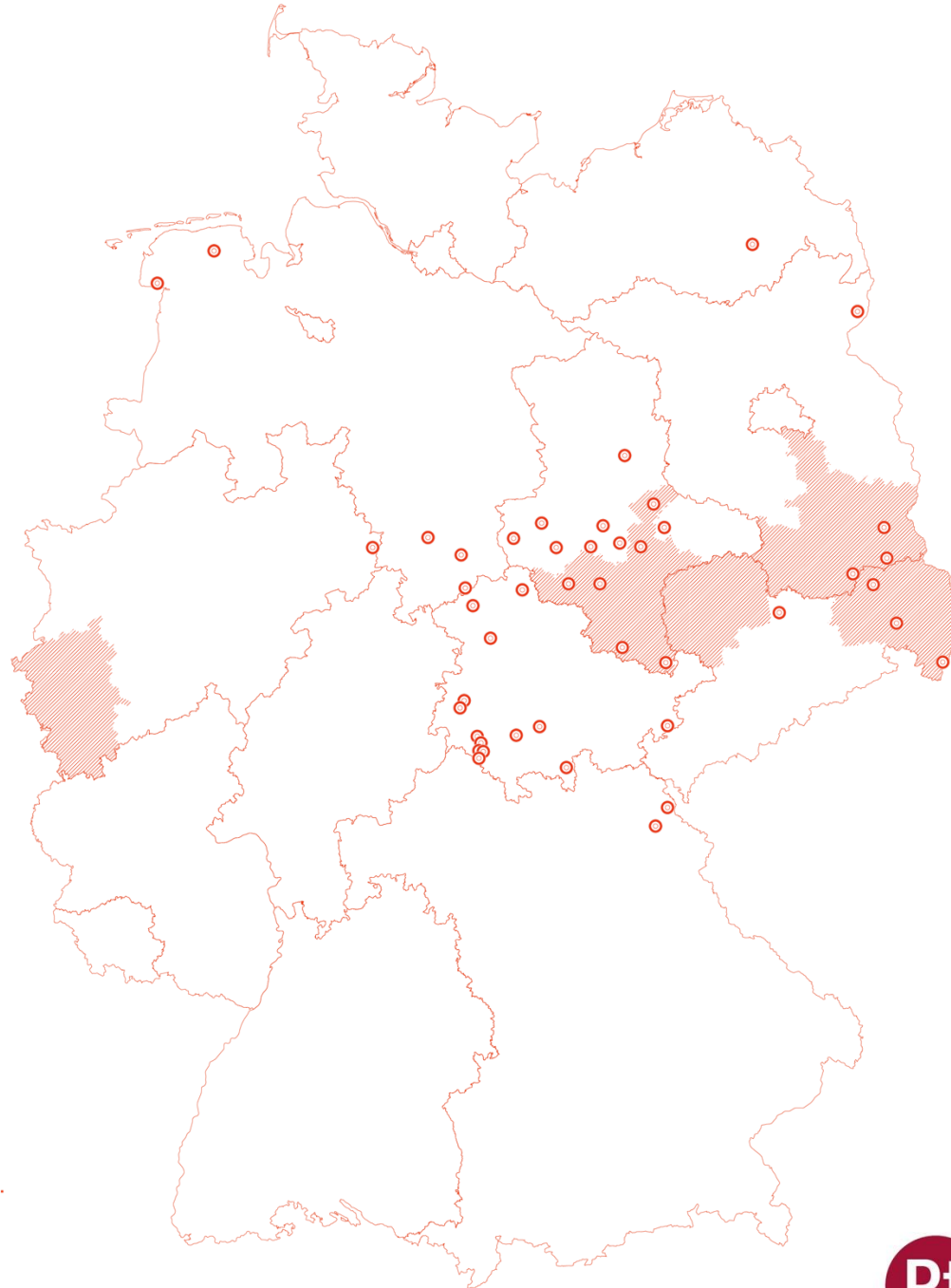
Typical for Medium-Sized Towns? → SPACE AND ISSUES

- **Limited Significance of Population Figures**: They provide only rough approximations of a town's specific characteristics.

- **Diversity of Medium-Sized Towns**: Variations in settlement and transport structures, exacerbated by regional reforms in some federal states.

- **Infrastructure Connections**: Differences in connectivity to the rail network; varying spatial settings.

- **Spectrum of Urban Development**: Ranges from urban to peripheral locations, including both growing and shrinking areas.

- **Regional Dimension**: Medium-sized towns play a central role in polycentric settlement areas or as key locations in rural areas; development potential is closely tied to regional relationships.

Typical for Medium-Sized Towns? → SPACE AND ISSUES

In small medium-sized towns, almost all of the **issues** and questions that arise in larger cities are also relevant, but in many cases they arise differently or under different circumstances.

Transformation Concerns of Small and Medium-Sized Towns:

- **Energy and sustainability transition, climate protection**
- **New mobility concepts**
- **Digitalization and smart towns**
- **Attractive living conditions, livable towns**
- **Economic development**
- **Demographic change and health**
- **The future of town centers**

(Results of the 2020 surveys in the Medium-Sized Towns Network)

Typical for Medium-Sized Towns? → GOVERNANCE

Focus research training group: Exchange and cooperation between researchers and administrative staff in small to medium-sized towns.

Governance level:
- Tasks, roles, structures, and processes of town administrations.
- Includes collaboration with urban actors.

Research areas:
- Governance arrangements for digital transformation.
- Barriers to action in administrative change processes.
- Dialogue structures between city administrations and climate activists.
- The Expectations behind Citizen Participation.
- Adaptability of small towns in the context of regional structural change.

The Role of Public Administration in Smaller Towns

Findings from Marie Graef, Florian Markscheffel and Cordula Kropp

- Public administration is considered a **key player** in the planning and implementation of **socio-ecological transformation** at the local level.

- Administrative staff perceive a structure that favors **maintaining the status quo**.

- Even as **part of local networks of actors**, the administration must fulfill structurally predetermined **obligations**.

- The findings raise the question of **how and whether local governments can play a formative, even proactive role** in socio-ecological transformation processes under these conditions.

A Typical Culture of Participation in Smaller Towns?

Findings from Lea Fischer

Compared to larger towns, smaller towns tend to be characterized by:

1. **greater social proximity**, greater density of personal contacts, greater importance of informal networks in (political) decision-making

2. **less specialization in municipal administration**, greater flexibility of employees

3. **greater importance of urban land-use planning**, stronger position of the urban planning authority in municipal administration and in the town's social fabric

(Brombach and Jessen 2005; Francke, Vogt, and Dehmel 2018; Görmar et al. 2020; **Levin-Keitel et al. 2019**; Lindner 2010; **Rüdiger 2009**, 2011, 2012)

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The Landscape of Actors in Small Medium-Sized Towns – Social Proximity?!

"Those who guide the fortunes of a city get in **touch** with us." (T1, 430-432)

"Here, no one has to worry about who is **responsible** for what." (T1, 419)

"The fact that people know each other is not so typical of the relationship between citizens and the city, but it is quite normal in **rural areas**." (T1, 543)

"As a citizen here, you can still really talk to the city and have **points of contact** with many actors." (T2, 116)

"I always have a **small circle** of people that I activate." (T2, 298)

"The smaller a community is, the more likely it is that certain stakeholders are **related** or connected to each other." (T2, 398-400)

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The Landscape of Actors in Small Medium-Sized Towns – Social Distance?!

"We see room for improvement in the **feedback** we receive from the urban community on the information we provide." (T1, 536-540)

"I consider thesis B ['Everyone knows each other in a small town'] to be **dangerous**: I would never claim that I know everyone." (T2, 302-310)

"There are also many actors who are not so well known and active, who may have moved here and **need support** in finding the right people to talk to." (T1, 530)

"Opinions and interests **are** constantly **changing**, especially in the political arena." (T2, 338)

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Stakeholders in Small and Medium-Sized Towns – In Transition

"There is a need here to preserve existing structures." (T1, 766)

"The gener**ational change** is making it more difficult to keep track of the actors." (T1, 421)

"Inward migration could lead to a completely different structure of the population, so that everything is more mixed and **urban lifestyles** are more prevalent in rural areas." (T1, 576-578)

"In politics, too, traditional **party affiliations** are changing and there are more protests against established structures." (T1, 603-606)

"We now have people and **groups to involve**, which is something I didn't think about at all 15 years ago." (T2, 364-366)

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Capable Administration of Small Medium-Sized Towns?

"A **large city** has completely different political structures with many levels, such as district councils. This means that large cities hinder themselves." (T1, 714-722)

"This is better in medium-sized cities, where there is the right level of discussion, whether with the administrative board or the political committees. This is much closer to the action; a **small town** may be too small to be able to take action." (T1, 731)

The Creative Power of Public Administration?

Findings from Marie Graef

– Many public administration (PA) officials see medium-sized towns as the "golden mean" for intra-organizational change agents → sufficient PA resources, well-know local networks, shorter processes of decision-making, quickly achievable visible changes in the town.

– BUT the powerful role of PA is in the towns of the case studies not socially accepted, leading to a *performance of neutrality* of many PA officials and an underuse of the transformative potential of their jobs due to fears of conflict and questions of legitimacy.

Smaller Towns Within Regional Structural Change

Research from Christiane Schubert

Lusatian Mining Area

Central German Mining Area

Rhenish Mining Area

NDL
BEL

Düsseldorf
Bedburg
Cologne
Aachen
Rhine river

Mining Areas in Germany
Funding area of the RMA
Core area of 20 municipalities
District border
Opencast mines in the RMA
Large cities (< 100,000)
Medium-sized cities (20,000 - 100,000)
Small cities (> 20,000)
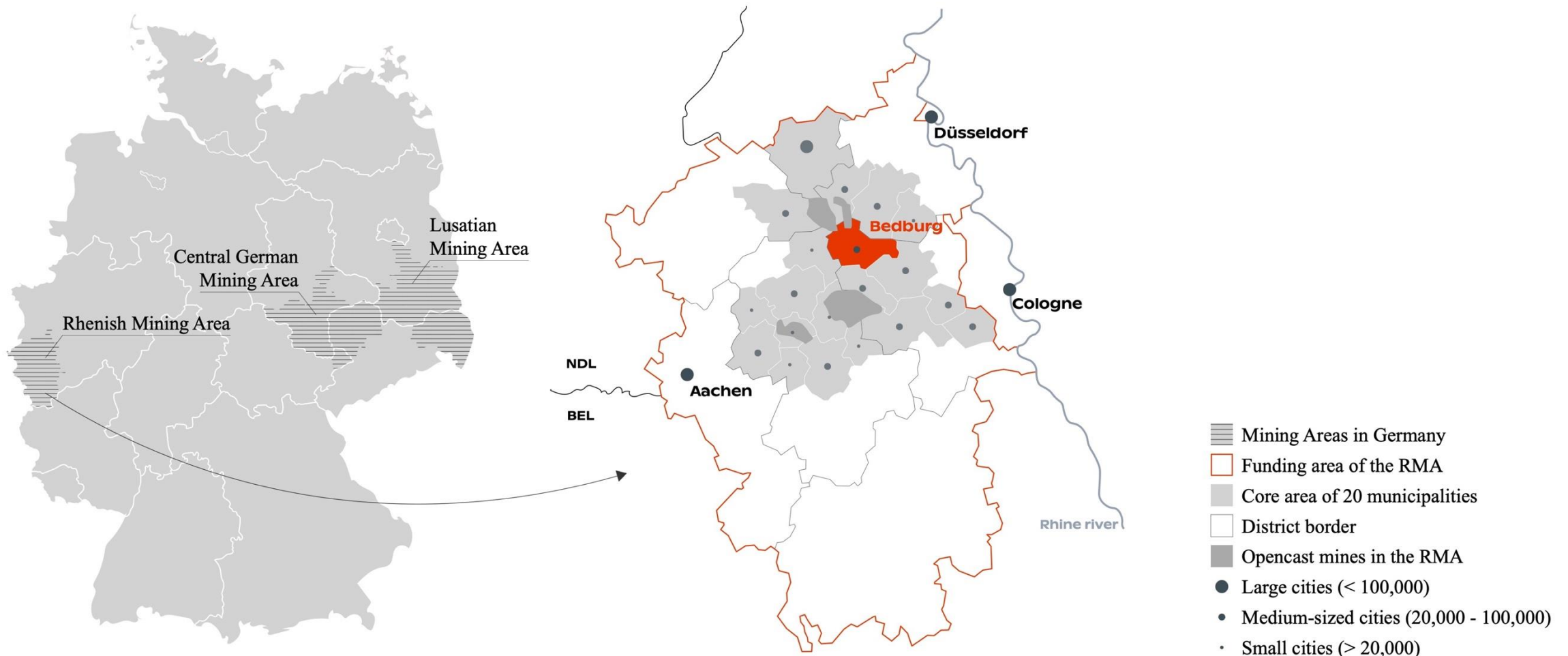
Transformative Capacity of Smaller Towns

Research question: To what extent does the regional structural change process influence the **transformative capacity** of a municipality in the Rhineland mining area?

Transformative capacity
as the ability to consciously and strategically initiate, enable/promote, and manage change

1. Resource-based potential and

$\updownarrow$
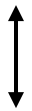
2. Action-oriented ability

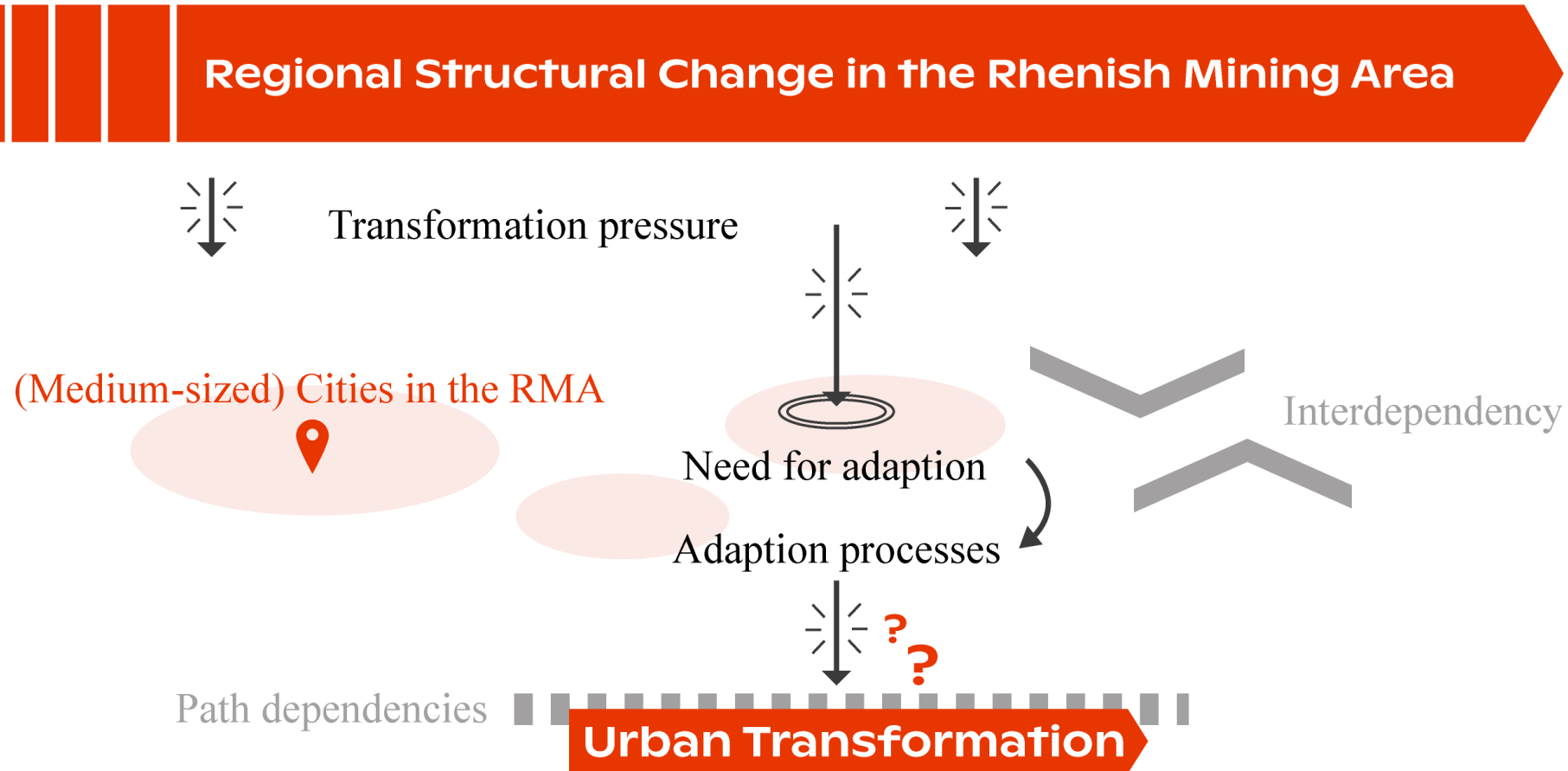(Wolfram et al. 2019; Borrás et al. 2024)

- Not static, but dynamic and developable
- Co-evolution between transformative capacity and different transformation paths and phases
- Development always comes from within

→ Discussed and conceptualized in theory, but: empirical research needed

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A Multi-Level Governance Approach
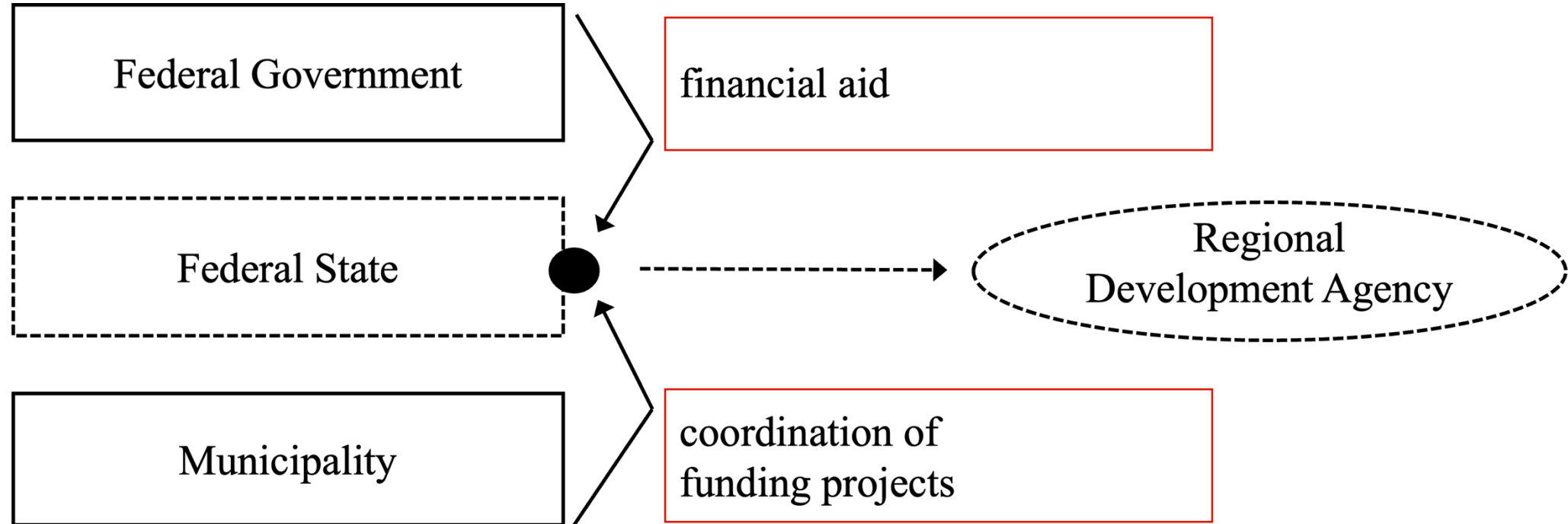
Christiane Schubert according to Ribbeck-Lampel & Nettelbladt 2024
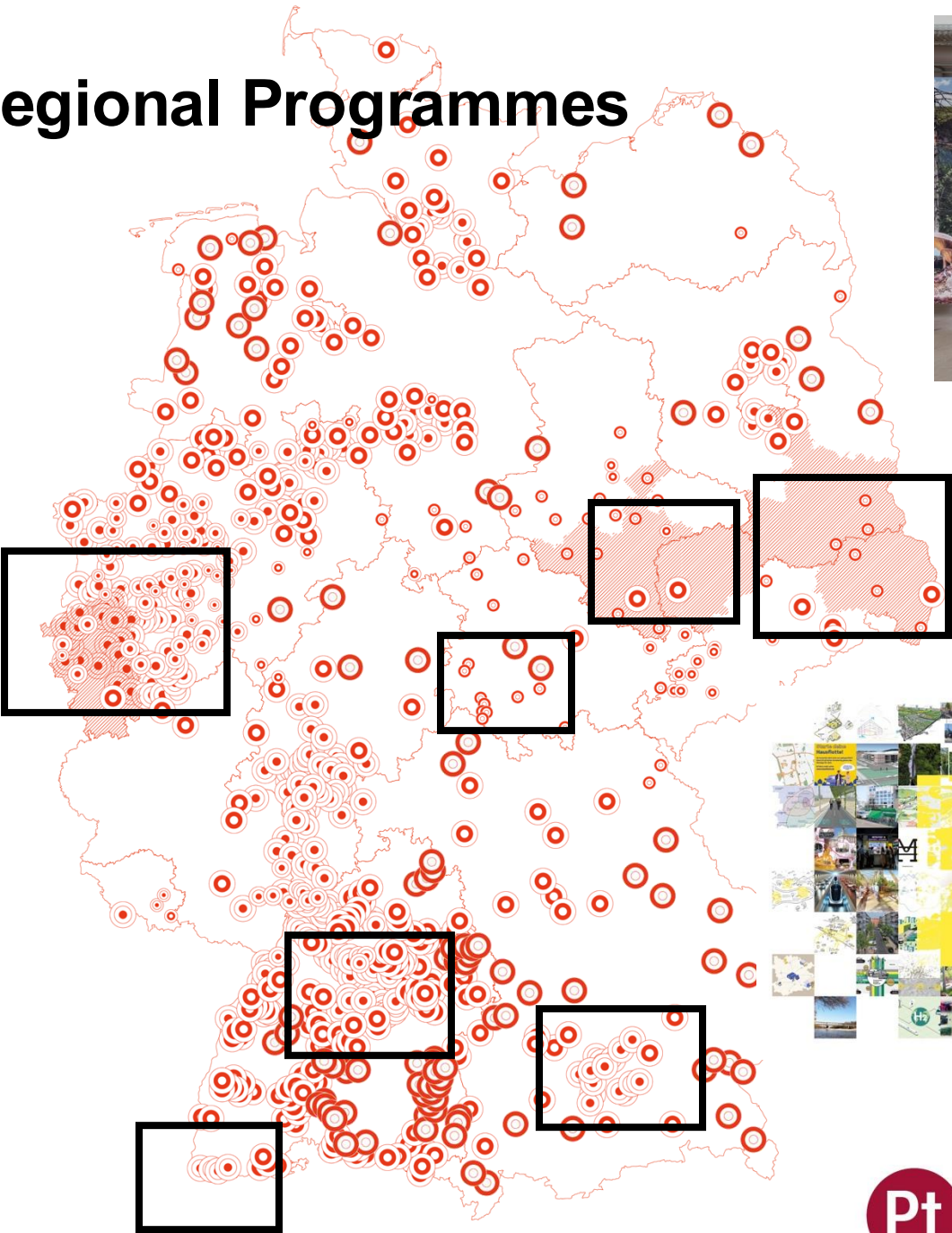
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Smaller Towns Within Regional Structural Change

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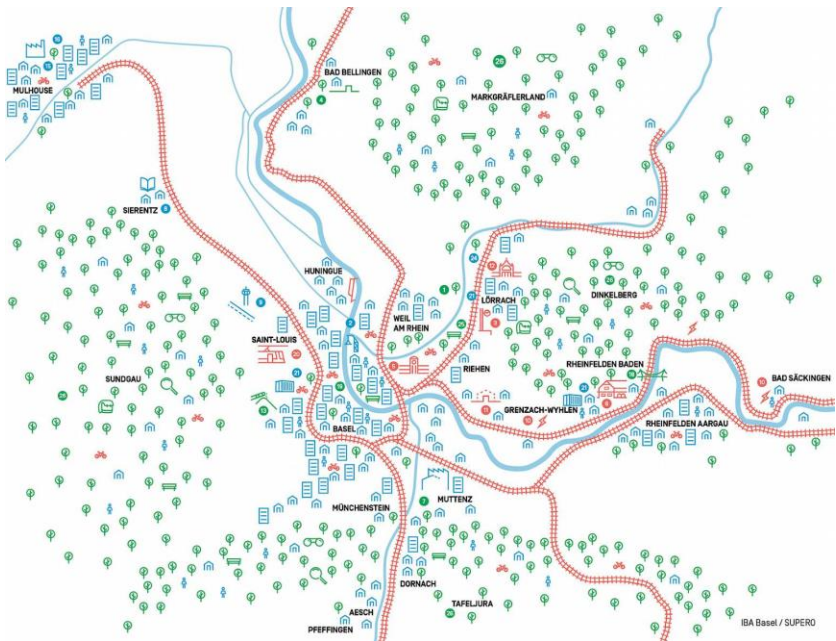
Thank you!

More questions than answers

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