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Regional and Urban Development - The Importance of Municipalities in the Development Process

Desenvolvimento Regional e Urbano – A Importância dos Municípios no Processo de Desenvolvimento

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RESUMO

Este artigo objetiva analisar a evolução das teorias de desenvolvimento regional e urbano, com ênfase em uma divisão temporal observada a partir da década de 1970. Nesta análise é destaca a gestão pública, particularmente no âmbito municipal, como um componente estratégico essencial para a promoção do desenvolvimento regional. Os municípios, que concentram os principais agentes econômicos e sociais, desempenham um papel crucial na implementação de políticas públicas. Este artigo também ressalta os desafios enfrentados pela gestão municipal na identificação e implementação de estratégias eficazes, os quais representam obstáculos significativos ao avanço do desenvolvimento regional. Em sua conclusão, o artigo sublinha a importância de uma gestão municipal bem estruturada e integrada, que leve em consideração as especificidades regionais e contribua para um desenvolvimento equilibrado, inclusivo e sustentável.

Palavras-chave: Desenvolvimento regional; setor público; gestão municipal.

JEL:

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the evolution of theories of regional and urban development, with emphasis on a temporal division observed from the 1970s onwards. This analysis highlights public management, particularly at the municipal level, as an essential strategic component for the promotion of regional development. Municipalities, which concentrate the main economic and social agents, play a crucial role in the implementation of public policies. This article also highlights the challenges faced by municipal management in identifying and implementing effective strategies, which represent significant obstacles to the advancement of regional development. In its conclusion, the article highlights the importance of well-structured and integrated municipal management, which takes into account regional specificities and contributes to balanced, inclusive and sustainable development.

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Keywords: Regional development, public sector, municipal management

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1. Introduction

The review of regional and urban development theories highlights a temporal division starting from the 1970s, marked by economic crises and significant technological changes, such as the oil shocks and the emergence of microelectronics. In the 1990s, the focus shifted to local development and decentralized policies, influenced by capitalist globalization, European regional policy, and saturation problems in industrial districts. These changes were driven by new challenges imposed by the flexible production of multinationals, the need for strategic interaction between public and private sectors, and the urgency to address environmental issues and growing individualization.

Regional development involves an effort by local societies in formulating regional policies, aiming to discuss issues that make the region the protagonist of its own development process. This approach highlights the importance of active participation by local communities in identifying their needs and potentialities. Thus, regional policies become tools to empower regions, promoting more inclusive and sustainable development. Collaboration among different local actors is essential to achieve these goals, ensuring that development is tailored to the specificities of each region.

The literature on regional development presents several models such as those by Von Thunen (1826), Schumpeter (1911), Isard (1956), Perroux (1955), Piore and Sabel (1964), among others. However, there is a gap regarding the importance of public management, especially municipal management, in this development process. At the municipal level, families and businesses are found, and it is in the municipality that public policies from federal and state governments are implemented. Therefore, a well-structured municipal public management not only has the capacity to implement public policies but also to promote local economic development. This occurs by encouraging production, combating the causes of poverty and marginalization, and promoting social integration of various sectors, as established in Article 23 of the Federal Constitution of 1988.

The importance of municipalities, as basic units of administrative organization, lies in their strategic role in formulating and implementing policies that directly impact the economy and the well-being of the local population. However, municipal management often faces significant challenges in identifying and implementing effective measures that drive regional and economic development.

2. Theories of Regional Development

Before presenting the theoretical productions in regional economics, it is necessary to address the methodological challenges related to defining the very object of analysis in this branch of economic science, as there is no universally accepted definition of "region." According to Higgins (1969, apud FERREIRA, 1989), this failure reflects the simple fact that no concept of region can simultaneously satisfy geographers, political scientists, economists, anthropologists, among others.

According to Cavalcante (2015), if the concept of region is understood simply as territorially delimited spaces, Adam Smith's "The Wealth of Nations" could be considered part of the theoretical production of regional economics, since nations are essentially human groupings generally fixed in a territory.

The difficulties in delimiting the object of study of regional economics, along with the lack of a systematic treatment of the different approaches on the subject, constitute an obstacle to research that seeks to establish causal relationships between the development of subnational regions and specific intervention actions. Despite these obstacles, the literature presents three major theoretical sets on which regional economic studies are based.

The first set of theorists focuses on classical location theories, with the first work presented by Von Thünen (1826): "Der isolierte Staat." Followed by Weber (1909): "*Über den Standort der Industrien*," Christaller (1933): "*Die zentralen Orte in Süddeutschland*," Losch (1940): "*Die räumliche* Ordnung der Wirtschaft," and Isard (1956): "Location and Space Economy." These authors generally sought to highlight decisions from the firm's perspective, considering the role of transport costs, to determine its optimal location.

The second set is based on regional development theories, emphasizing agglomeration factors, influenced by Marshallian and Keynesian approaches in the 1950s. According to Cavalcante (2015), it is challenging to obtain a definitive record of the first author to explicitly address the issue of activity agglomeration as a determining factor for the location of new initiatives and, consequently, for economic growth. Despite this difficulty, most scholars tend to recognize the ideas of Alfred Marshall (1842-1924) as pioneering in this context.

In this second set of theorists, the main references that highlighted the development of subnational spaces include Perroux (1955), who presented the Growth Poles Theory, which proposes that economic development is not distributed homogeneously but is concentrated in poles or growth centers that influence adjacent regions, often driven by dynamic industries. Myrdal (1957) developed the Theory of Circular and Cumulative Causation, emphasizing that economic processes tend to reinforce each other, generating cycles of expansion or contraction. In his exposition, more developed regions attract a greater volume of investments and resources, while less developed regions face increasing difficulties, deepening regional disparities (DUARTE 2013, pp. 7-8).

The third theorist in this second set is Hirschman (1958), who formulated the Theory of Unbalanced Growth, arguing that economic development occurs unevenly, which can be beneficial. According to Hirschman, initial investments in strategic sectors can trigger chain effects, promoting the growth of other sectors and regions (DUARTE 2013, p. 9). These theories are also known as 'top-down' Regional Policies.

The third set had Marshallian and especially Schumpeterian influences, with notable works by Piore and Sabel (1964), who introduced the concept of Industrial Districts, referring to geographic areas where small and medium-sized enterprises cluster and collaborate, creating an environment of innovation and productive flexibility. Storper and Scott (1988) explored Industrial Organization and how the location of industries is influenced by factors such as technological innovation, market structure, and public policies. Krugman (1991), in his work on Increasing Returns and Economic Geography, brought a new perspective to economic theory by incorporating scale effects and the location of economic activities.

This third set of regional development theorists highlights the importance of interactions between companies, innovation, and increasing returns for regional economic development. They provide a theoretical basis for understanding how regions can specialize and prosper through collaboration and the concentration of economic activities (CAVALCANTE 2015, p. 17).

Cavalcante (2015) outlines the main schools of thought on the subject, considering the period from 1820 to 2000. The diagram aims to highlight three major theoretical sets and their main influences, represented by arrows and chronological order based on the year of publication of the work.

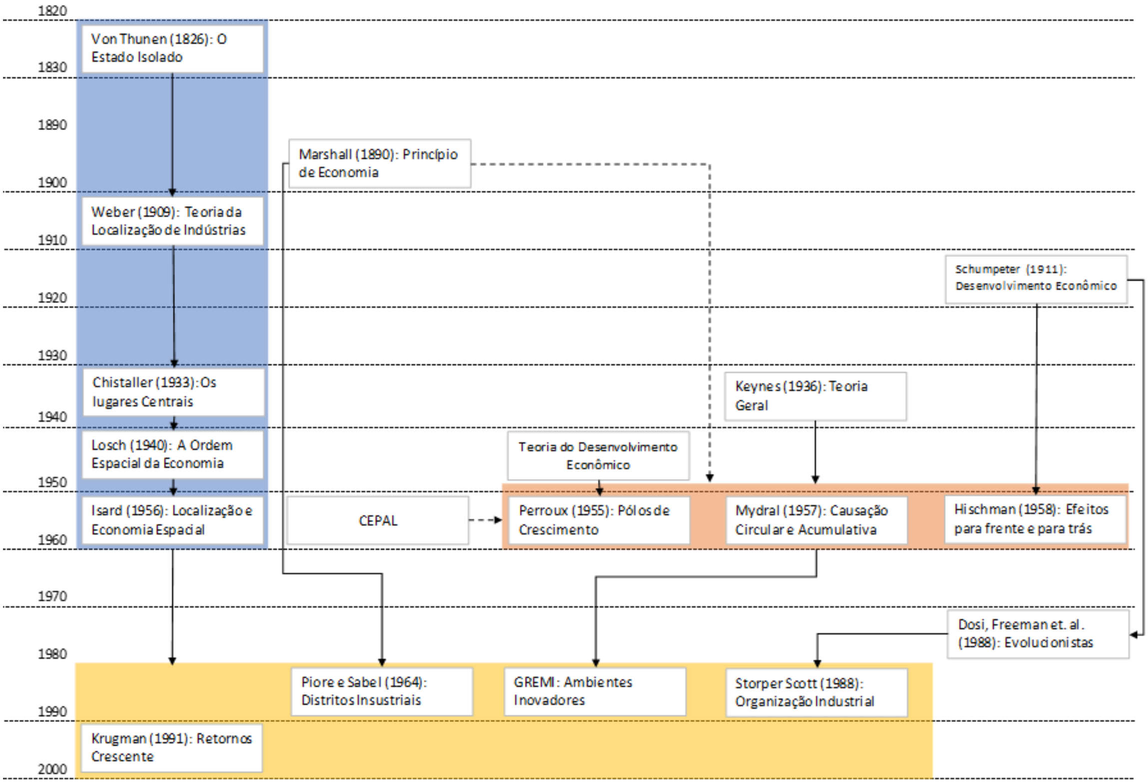

Figure1 - Main Theories of Regional Development
Source: Cavalcante (2015, p. 5)

From the 1950s onwards, these theories began to inspire public policies for regional development and analytical studies aimed at assessing their adequacy to reality. Over time, efforts to incorporate models and approaches that could address new production patterns based on flexible integrated automation, i.e., a rapid and efficient adaptation of automated systems to meet changes in production demands and movements of trade liberalization and economic deregulation, began to be observed. It seems that it is precisely at this moment that theoretical production in regional economics assumes a more interdisciplinary character, and the texts begin to include an increasing number of references, making it difficult to establish a continuous flow in the evolution of thought (CAVALCANTE, 2015, p. 5).

The first references from the mid-1970s and early 1980s treat development as being driven by diffuse industrialization, reflecting on the emergence of industrial development models based on small businesses and peripheral regions. These models were presented by authors such as Becattini (1975; 1989; 1990), Garofoli (1978; 1981), and Fuà and Zacchia (1983).

Diffuse[1] industrialization was analysed from a theoretical perspective that integrated an analytical framework composed of three dimensions: society, territory, and forms of productive organization. This analytical model encompasses the economic sphere (relations between companies), the social sphere (characteristics of the social structure and conditions for social cohesion), and the territorial sphere (territorial organization and local governance structure).

[1] According to Tapia (2005, p. 134), diffuse industrialization and industrial districts were interpreted as spontaneous processes, resulting from the combination of various favorable internal factors and external catalysts. It refers to the emergence of differentiated industrial activity centers in multiple countries or regions. These centers do not follow a uniform pattern and can be geographically dispersed.

Diniz and Crocco (2006) highlight that, in this context, a clear transition in the structure of regional policies adopted can be observed. Until the mid-1970s, top-down regional policies prevailed, with an emphasis on demand and correcting inter-regional income disparities, typical of the Keynesian model. After this period, the design of regional policies shifted to a bottom-up approach, characterized by decentralization and a focus on the endogenous productivity of regional and local economies, known as competitiveness-oriented policies.

For the purposes of temporal delimitation, from the 1980s onwards, four main theoretical strands of the so-called 'New Regionalism' or a 'New Orthodoxy' will be considered, focusing on the observation, theorization, and analysis of the local, region, or territory[2].

The 1990s were marked by the relevance of local development and decentralized policies due to the European strategy of reinforcing decentralization programs for regions. There were at least three main vectors for these changes during this period. First, capitalist globalization and the flexible[3] production of multinational companies imposed new challenges on industrial districts. Second, European regional policy stimulated local development through new public policies and institutional arrangements, promoting strategic interaction between the public and private sectors. Third, saturation problems emerged in industrial districts, including environmental issues, increased individualism, and the need for innovative strategies to address the impacts of globalization and large multinational companies (TAPIA, 2005, p. 132).

The city of Bilbao, in Spain, is a remarkable example of overcoming industrial decline. During the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the region experienced an intense development process, driven by sectors such as steel, shipbuilding, port activities, and iron ore mining. This economic dynamism consolidated Bilbao and its metropolitan area as an important reference hub in the European context. However, from the second half of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the city faced a pronounced industrial decline, representing a challenging period in its economic and social trajectory.

> Unemployment rose significantly reaching as high as 35% in some municipalities in the metropolitan area. After losing world-class business groups, the crisis left behind a physically and environmentally severely affected environment due to the previous industrial development, as well as emigration processes, stagnant population and the emergence of social exclusion problems. (POSTIGO, 2024, pág 01).

With the region's potential due to its geographical location relative to markets and ports, its previous productive experience, business leadership, accumulated knowledge, the presence of educational and research institutions, the labor market, transportation infrastructure, and the availability of urban services, among other factors, it was possible to build a strategic revitalization plan that began in 1989.

The dynamics of the local economic system and its transformation would depend on both local specificities and governance structures, as well as the capacity of local elites who control key

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[2] According to Dallabrida (2010, p. 112), it brings an approach that has as its basic reference the concept of the Marshallian industrial district; regulationist; neo-Schumpeterian or evolutionary economics and institutionalist and/or neo-institutionalist

[3] Flexible production is related to the adaptable production process to respond more quickly to market changes and consumer demand, allowing the production of different products to vary in less time, quantity, and cost. According to David Harvey in his work *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), flexible production is a response to the new stage of capitalist accumulation known as flexible accumulation, where companies react to the pressures of globalization and market fragmentation

variables affecting development. This productive potential is not static and can be modified by technological changes, variations in demand profiles, the arrival of large companies, or the construction of infrastructure projects (DINIZ; CROCCO 2006).

Diniz and Crocco (2006) highlight that each region or locality has its own attributes, which makes the application of a single, generalizable innovation model unfeasible. Therefore, it is necessary for each region to create conditions and policies according to its specificities. Various institutional forms of innovative arrangements have been applied globally, such as business incubators, technology parks, and more recently, local productive arrangements[4].

Collaboration between academic and research institutions with innovative companies. However, the success of these initiatives is strongly linked to scientific and urban externalities, making their implementation difficult in small and medium-sized cities in peripheral regions. In local productive arrangements, the idea prevails that success is achieved by small and medium-sized enterprises in specific sectors through cooperation and synergy to solve common problems (DINIZ; CROCCO, 2006).

Curi (2016) argues that a developed urban infrastructure plays a crucial role in stimulating and facilitating private investment. By providing a solid base of services and facilities, such as efficient transportation, basic sanitation, reliable energy, and advanced communication, the infrastructure attracts companies and investors seeking a favorable environment for their operations. This, in turn, generates a positive development cycle, creating numerous job opportunities for the local population. Improving urban infrastructure not only increases the competitiveness of cities but also enhances the quality of life for residents by providing better access to essential services, reducing operational costs, and increasing productive efficiency.

3. The Importance of Municipalities in the Regional Development Process

The literature on the role of municipalities in regional development presents different approaches, which, although heterogeneous, converge in emphasizing the relevance of these entities for the socioeconomic progress of regions. Among the main approaches, three stand out. The first focuses on the decentralization of public management, highlighting the administrative autonomy of municipalities. The second deals with collective actions promoted by municipalities, carried out through councils, such as the Coredes[5] in Rio Grande do Sul, which foster the articulation between different instances of local power. Finally, the third approach refers to municipal consortia, whose purpose is to promote intermunicipal cooperation for the implementation of joint projects. The

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[4] Local productive arrangements are territorial agglomerations of economic, political, and social agents – focusing on a specific set of economic activities – that have links, even if incipient. They generally involve the participation and interaction of companies – which can range from producers of final goods and services to suppliers of inputs and equipment, consulting and service providers, marketers, customers, among others – and their various forms of representation and association. They also include various other public and private organizations aimed at: human resource training and capacity building, such as technical schools and universities; research, development, and engineering; policy, promotion, and financing. (Observatório APL do Governo Federal - https://www.gov.br/empresas-e-negocios/pt-br/portais-desconhecidos/observatorioapl).

[5] Regional Development Council. It is an instance of participation and regional planning in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. They are composed of representatives from various segments of society who decisively participate in the collective deliberations guiding regional and state development. (Ávila et al., 2013, p. 124).

common point among these perspectives is the demonstration of the central role of municipalities in the regional development process.

The first approach, called the decentralized approach in municipal management, refers to the distribution of decision-making power and responsibilities among different levels and sectors of local government. Although there is no consensus on this concept, the progressive perspective, that is, a search to promote social, political, and economic changes with the aim of achieving greater justice, equity, and collective well-being, interprets it as a strategy to restructure the state apparatus, not with the intention of reducing it, but of making it more agile and efficient. This vision seeks to democratize public management by creating new instances of power and redefining the relationships between the state and society society[6](JUNQUEIRA, 1998, pág. 12).

According to Junqueira (1999), the decentralization process, as a governmental strategy, requires repositioning each federative entity within its specific sphere of competence. Thus, it is the municipality's responsibility to provide local services to its population, while the State and the Union offer support through the regulation of relations and the mitigation of regional inequalities. This arrangement ensures intergovernmental and intersectoral cooperation within the federative unit, with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of life of the population.

From this perspective, municipalization, as part of the decentralization process, has the potential not only to increase the effectiveness of public management of social policies but also to promote a gradual transformation of the State. This transformation involves a clear definition of its mission and the restructuring of its organizational structure.

Regarding governance, Dallabrida (2010) defines it as the set of initiatives or actions that demonstrate the capacity of a territorially organized society to manage public affairs jointly and cooperatively, involving social, economic, and institutional actors. Brazilian experiences of political-administrative decentralization are conceived as main examples of the institutionalization of new territorial governance scales, aiming at territorial development.

Municipalities play a fundamental role in promoting economic development through their policies and initiatives. They are responsible for managing essential resources and services that affect the quality of life of the population, such as health, education, transportation, urban infrastructure, among others. In the Brazilian democratic context, the municipality would be the base of political and social organization, with a close relationship between the administered and the federated entity, creating greater possibilities for success in public policies (MENDONÇA; HOLANDA 2016).

> It is within the municipality, as the space where the population has access to services and where their problems manifest, that the articulation of social policies becomes viable, increasing the effectiveness of their management (JUNQUEIRA, 1999, p. 131).

According to Mendonça and Holanda (2016), municipalities are responsible for the success of public administration because their indicators interfere with the results of economic activities, in

[6] Decentralization is not limited to the mere transfer of duties and competencies within the State itself, among the three levels of government and their respective institutions. This process can also involve delegating responsibilities to private entities of a public nature. Thus, the State can transfer, for example, the provision of services in areas such as health and education to non-state entities, while maintaining its regulatory role and control over the quality and execution of these activities. (Junqueira, 1999, p. 131).

addition to fostering the creation of conditions for economic growth and the expansion of social aspects.

According to Grau (2008), municipal administration, by promoting local economic development and creating jobs that effectively increase citizens' income, can encourage behaviors through induction, participation, or absorption, influencing and driving economic activity. For Mendonça and Holanda (2016), the role of municipalities in the economy is not only an obligation but also a citizen's right, with the aim of generating favourable conditions for economic growth and sustainable development of the municipality.

Public Administration, in addition to fostering the creation of conditions for economic growth and the expansion of social aspects, enables the creation of public policies that drive and execute activities for the economy and attract investment to create the well-being of society in general (CARDOSO; ALMEIDA; MARCOS, 2023).

The competence of municipalities to promote local development is directly aligned with the principles and guidelines established by the 1988 Constitution. The Magna Carta recognizes municipal autonomy and establishes that municipalities must promote the well-being of their inhabitants, economic and social development, respecting the principles of human dignity, equality, and social justice (CF/88). Thus, by acting strategically in the local economy, municipalities are fulfilling not only their legal obligations but also their constitutional mission to ensure the progress and well-being of their population.

> Local growth is intrinsically related to how the municipality intervenes in the economy, whether through budget laws, development area programming, or fiscal incentives for the establishment of industries or services. Thus, the competence of municipalities to promote local development would be to meet the dictates of the 1988 Constitution (MENDONÇA; HOLANDA 2016, p. 225).

Municipal budget laws, such as the Multi-Year Plan (PPA), the Budget Guidelines Law (LDO), and the Annual Budget Law (LOA), are instruments that direct public resources to strategic areas such as infrastructure, health, education, culture, among others. The way these resources are allocated and prioritized directly reflects the opportunities for local economic growth.

The second approach addresses the collective actions of municipalities. Municipalities have the responsibility to plan urban development sustainably, identifying strategic areas for investments and promoting initiatives that attract enterprises and generate jobs. In the context of the Regional Development Councils (COREDEs), regional strategic plans are developed to drive this development. This micro-regional planning adopts a strategic vision, focused on the medium and long term, rather than limiting itself to addressing emergencies and immediate demands. Thus, it seeks to build a sustainable and lasting development model (ÁVILA et al., 2013, p. 116).

The third approach is municipal consortia, a form of cooperation between cities aimed at the joint management of services and projects of common interest. Intermunicipal public consortia allow municipalities to join efforts to face challenges that would be difficult to solve individually, thus promoting a model of cooperative federalism.

According to the National Confederation of Municipalities (CNM), Brazil has 723 active public consortia, covering 4,783 municipalities, which corresponds to 85.9% of the total municipalities in the country.

The Southeast Region concentrates the largest number of public consortia, with a total of 280. All states in this region have consortia, with Minas Gerais standing out with 163 headquarters. The South Region occupies the second position, with 192 headquarters, and similarly, all states have consortia, with Paraná being the most representative, with 76 headquarters. Next, the Northeast Region registers 163 consortia, with Bahia leading with 54 headquarters. The Midwest Region has

67 consortia, with the State of Mato Grosso standing out with 35 headquarters. Finally, the North Region has the smallest number of consortia, with only 25 headquarters, with Tocantins being the state with the largest number of headquarters municipalities (13).

In Brazil, the first planning experiences aimed at local, regional, and national development were implemented by the federal government in the mid-1930s, focusing on economic growth. In the late 1950s, the central government created SUDENE – Superintendence for the Development of the Northeast, and in 1970, the Superintendences for the Development of the Midwest – SUDECO and the South Region – SUDESUL. In the 1980s, although the central government showed interest in promoting regional planning and development, it was forced to focus its efforts on emergency actions related to the economic crisis and structural adjustment suggested by international financial organizations. The 1990s, in turn, were marked by a change in government policies, with the State reform, as highlighted by Bresser Pereira (1995), which ceased to be directly responsible for economic and social development through the production of goods and services, becoming a promoter and regulator of this development.

Given the unfavorable situation of less developed regions, Diniz and Crocco (2006) suggest the use of resources from constitutional funds and other legal funds not only for investments in the private productive sector but also for financing physical and social infrastructure through public entities, both at the federal and subnational levels (states and municipalities). In this context, one of the major challenges in implementing regional policies is defining the territorial scales of action and their operationalization based on regionalization criteria that are not limited to economic aspects.

In small municipalities, where there are often no industries, factories, or economic activities capable of driving development, as pointed out by Mendonça and Holanda (2016), promoting local development can be achieved by supporting family farming, local commerce, and the solidarity economy. Initiatives such as farmers' markets, government food purchase programs, and rural tourism can be important tools. By promoting entrepreneurship and supporting micro and small enterprises, municipalities strengthen the economic fabric and diversify their economies.

Additionally, municipal administration can play an active role in promoting public-private partnerships (PPPs) and creating economic development programs, such as business incubators, innovation centers, and startup accelerators. These initiatives not only foster local entrepreneurship but also facilitate access to resources and training, contributing to the sustainable growth of the local economy.

However, as Curi (2013) points out, urban economic development faces the difficulty of municipal financing, given the Brazilian tax system and the vulnerability in the collection and distribution of resources. Furthermore, Orair (2016) highlights that municipal finances have pro-cyclical characteristics, that is, they vary according to the economic cycle, which compromises the long-term planning of local governments. The structure of municipal expenditures, which largely depends on transfers from state and federal governments, is also inflexible.

Thus, even with the formal power to implement policies, municipalities often lack the necessary financial resources, which are largely concentrated at the federal and state levels. Silva and Crisóstomo (2019) argue that the correct performance of municipal public management is crucial to dynamize priority areas and enhance economic and social results.

4. Final Remarks

Regional and urban development underwent profound transformations starting from the 1970s and 1990s, reflecting the economic crises and technological changes of the time. The focus shifted from centralized policies aimed at correcting inter-regional disparities to a decentralized approach that values local protagonism and regional competitiveness. In this context, municipalities emerge as crucial agents in the development process, playing a strategic role in implementing public policies and stimulating economic and social growth.

An example illustrating the relevance of municipal actions as strategic planners of development is the case of Bilbao, Spain. The city faced a severe industrial crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, resulting from the decline of traditional activities such as steel and shipbuilding, which were pillars of its economy. This challenging situation led Bilbao to adopt an innovative and integrated urban planning approach, combining urban space requalification, infrastructure investments, economic diversification, and cultural promotion.

However, municipal management faces significant challenges, especially regarding the financing of its actions. The Brazilian tax system and the vulnerability in the collection and distribution of resources among federal, state, and municipal levels limit the financial autonomy of municipalities. Municipal finances have pro-cyclical characteristics, meaning resources vary according to the economic cycle, which compromises long-term planning and the continuous implementation of development policies. Additionally, the structure of municipal expenditures is inflexible, as a large part of their resources depends on transfers from state and federal governments, and significant portions of municipal budgets are tied to mandatory expenses, imposing limitations on local management. These aspects will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Despite these challenges, municipal management continues to play a vital role in inclusive and sustainable development. By articulating policies that address local specificities and fostering collaboration between public and private sectors, municipalities can be catalysts for development, driving the local economy and improving the well-being of the population. Thus, the analysis of regional development cannot be dissociated from the actions of local governments, whose capacity to adapt and implement policies is essential for the success of development strategies.

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