

Analysis of development factors and by-products of small towns – case study of the town of Chojnice (Poland)

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Abstract

Small towns constitute a vital component of the local economy. However, they currently face numerous challenges related to demographic trends, urban investments, and the availability of local products. The town of Chojnice in Poland was selected as a case study for the research on the development factors of small towns and their by-products. Methods such as SWOT analysis were applied to assess development factors and local products, while the role of resources in creating by-products was also evaluated. The results indicate that Chojnice is experiencing a demographic crisis, while its unique geographical location presents both an advantage and a disadvantage.

Keywords

Small towns, territorial marketing, small-town development, social factors, economic factors, environmental factors

Izvleček

Analiza razvojnih dejavnikov in stranskih produktov malih mest – študija primera mesta Chojnice (Poljska)

Mala mesta predstavljajo ključen element lokalnega gospodarstva. Trenutno se soočajo z različnimi izzivi, povezanimi z demografskimi trendi, urbanimi investicijami in razpoložljivostjo lokalnih proizvodov. Mesto Chojnice na Poljskem je bilo izbrano kot študija primera za raziskovanje dejavnikov razvoja malih mest in njihovih produktov. Uporabljene so bile metode, kot je analiza SWOT, za oceno razvojnih dejavnikov in lokalnih produktov, prav tako je bila ocenjena vloga virov pri ustvarjanju produktov. Rezultati kažejo, da Chojnice doživlja demografsko krizo, medtem ko njihova edinstvena geografska lega predstavlja tako prednosti kot tudi slabosti.

Ključne besede

Mala mesta, teritorialni marketing, razvoj malih mest, socialni dejavniki, ekonomski dejavniki, okoljski dejavniki



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1 Introduction

Small towns play a crucial role in regional networks and serve as important elements in the urban structure of states. They often determine the degree of development in a given region, as they act as centers for cultural and social events. However, despite their significance, they are frequently undervalued in development policies. The development trajectory of such urban centers is not straightforward, as it is influenced by numerous internal and external policy factors, including social, economic, and environmental aspects.

Among economic factors, the most critical appears to be a high level of business activity and ongoing investments, particularly those related to infrastructure. According to Gong et al. (2022), industrial investments, together with GDP per capita and urban density, are the most influential elements affecting the development of small towns. Investments often drive economic growth, thereby increasing the attractiveness of towns. Such actions attract new entrepreneurs, and business activity becomes a key driver of development (Voronov, 2022). Additional factors that enhance the situation in small urban units include investments in transport—such as roads and other communication routes that connect local producers with markets—as well as social and healthcare services provided by towns (Rondinelli, 1983).

A significant social factor is the demographic situation of towns. As Vilcea et al. (2024) points out, population decline can have considerable consequences and pose challenges for future development. Therefore, it is crucial to implement dedicated social policies aimed at preventing depopulation or minimizing its adverse effects. Local authorities should actively pursue external funding and support local social and economic initiatives (Voronov, 2022).

Among environmental factors, geographical location plays a fundamental role in urban development, as it directly affects town functioning. Settlement functions of the area, possibilities for expansion, and appropriate spatial planning also play a crucial role (Tang et al., 2023). The location of towns often enables development due to favorable natural conditions, such as the availability of resources and unique environmental assets.

Given the wide range of factors influencing development, small towns face numerous challenges. Atkinson (2020) notes that to develop effective political strategies and incorporate them into efforts toward social, economic, and territorial cohesion, a thorough understanding of the operational model of such urban centers is necessary. Small towns play a pivotal role in the broader regional policy by supporting the development of rural areas, integrating rural and urban economies, and transforming agriculture toward commercial production (Rondinelli, 1983). Technological advancements in the modern world can significantly aid in promoting small and medium-sized towns as key drivers of sustainable regional development (Noronha, 2020). However, their developmental role may vary depending on the context in which they are examined, which imposes a pessimistic perspective on certain assumptions but underscores the necessity of policies tailored to local needs and challenges (Hinderink & Titus, 2002). Therefore, the development of small towns requires local authorities to leverage available resources to adapt to dynamic conditions and successfully compete with other communities (Daniels, 1989).

1.1 Characteristics of the Study Area

The subject of this study is the town of Chojnice, located in Poland, in the southern part of the Pomeranian Voivodeship (Figure 1). It serves as the administrative center for Chojnice County, the Urban Municipality of Chojnice, and the Rural Municipality of Chojnice. The town directly borders its rural counterpart and, as a county seat, indirectly connects with the municipalities of Brusy, Czersk, and Konarzyny. Situated on the boundary of the voivodeship, Chojnice also shares borders with Tuchola and Sępólno Counties, which belong to the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship. The nearest towns include Człuchów, a comparable urban center, as well as Czersk, Brusy, Tuchola, and Sępólno Krajeńskie. Chojnice's historical origins trace back to the medieval period, a legacy still evident in its urban fabric. The town retains its medieval fortifications, including defensive walls with towers, the Człuchów Gate, and the parish church located near the Old Town Market.

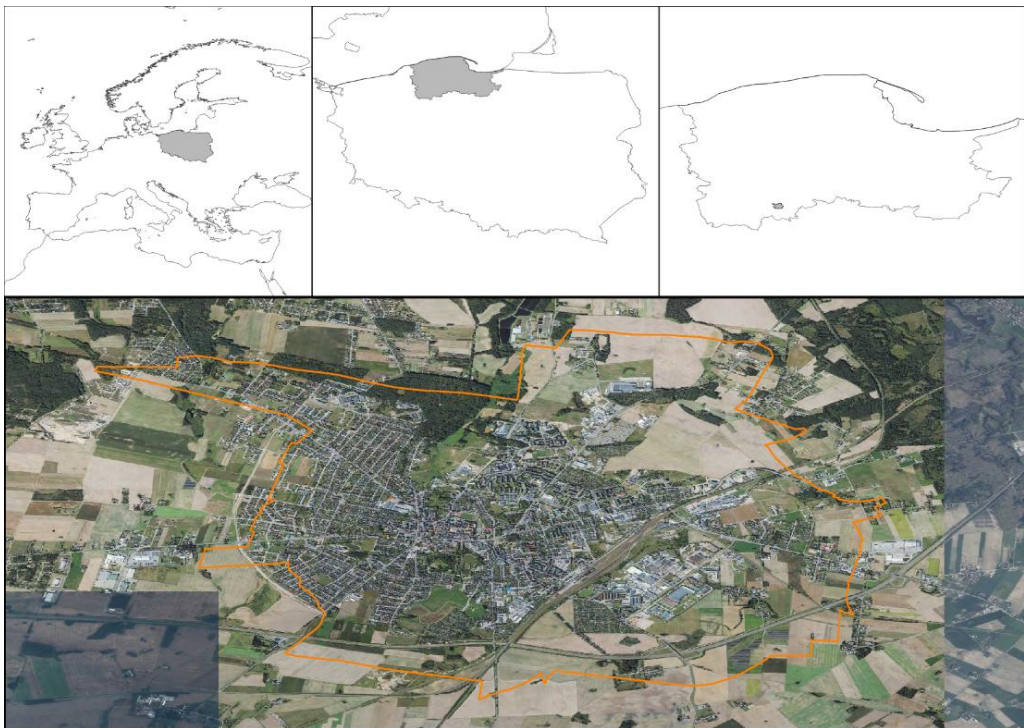


Figure 1: Location of the town of Chojnice in the context of Europe, Poland, and Voivodeship.

Source: Author's own work.

From a physical-geographical perspective, Chojnice is situated within the Krajeńskie Lakeland mesoregion, as classified by Kondracki (1998). This mesoregion forms part of the Eastern Pomeranian Lakeland macroregion, which in turn belongs to the broader Pomeranian Lakelands. Chojnice is the largest urban center within this geographical area, characterized by postglacial landforms, terminal moraines, and widespread brown soils. These features contribute to significant agricultural land use (Kondracki, 1998). The town's southern and southwestern surroundings primarily consist of agricultural areas, whereas to the north and northwest, Chojnice borders

the Charzykowy Plain. This adjacent region is distinguished by extensive forest complexes and numerous lakes, shaped by sandur formations associated with the Great Brda Sandur. The forested areas near Chojnice constitute part of the larger Tuchola Forest complex.

Due to its distinctive geographical and historical attributes, Chojnice possesses considerable tourism potential. The town directly borders the Zaborski Landscape Park, which serves as a buffer zone for the Tuchola Forest National Park—an area recognized for its scenic and ecological value (Lijewski et al., 2008). The presence of numerous nature reserves in the vicinity further underscores the rich biodiversity of this region. Additionally, the abundance of lakes and rivers, including the nearby Charzykowskie Lake, provides excellent conditions for the development of water sports and recreational activities.

One of the primary factors influencing Chojnice's location during the medieval period was its position at the intersection of significant trade routes. In contemporary times, the town continues to function as a crucial transportation hub. The primary transport corridor is National Road No. 22, a historically significant route that once connected Berlin and Königsberg, passing directly through Chojnice. To enhance traffic efficiency and divert transit flow away from the town center, a southern bypass was constructed, now accommodating the primary transit route. Other notable regional roads include Provincial Road No. 212, which links Chojnice with the central part of the voivodeship; Provincial Road No. 235, which connects Chojnice with Brusy and Kościerzyna; and Provincial Road No. 240, which facilitates access to Tuchola.

Chojnice is also a significant railway junction, with five railway lines connecting it to Tczew, Piła, Krzyż, Człuchów, Kościerzyna, Tuchola, and Bydgoszcz. However, due to insufficient investment and financial constraints, these railway lines remain non-electrified, limiting their role within the broader rail network and confining them primarily to regional and short-distance travel. Despite these infrastructural limitations, the expansion of the railway network historically contributed to the emergence of an industrial district in Chojnice, which today accommodates several manufacturing enterprises across diverse economic sectors.

The town actively fosters collaboration with neighboring local governments and serves as a regional center for culture and education. In partnership with municipal authorities and non-governmental organizations, Chojnice organizes numerous cultural and public events, enhancing its prominence within the region. Additionally, the town hosts a significant number of primary and secondary schools, some of which achieve commendable rankings at the regional and provincial levels, attracting students from surrounding towns and rural areas.

The role of the town of Chojnice as the cultural centre of the region is evident through its recurring cultural events and dedicated infrastructure. Major investments in recent years have included the redevelopment of the Chojnice Cultural Centre, which, in addition to exhibition space, primarily houses a cinema-theatre hall operating as a cinema on a daily basis, as well as the reconstruction and modernisation of the municipal amphitheatre located in the former town moat. A significant historical and cultural landmark in the town is also the Historical and Ethnographic Museum.

Among the most notable cultural events organised in Chojnice are the Chojnice Operetta Nights, Organ Concerts, the InterTony Partner Cities Festival, and the

“Chojnicka Fiesta” Street Art Festival. For several editions, the town also co-organised, in cooperation with neighbouring municipalities, the International Folklore Festival “Kashubian Encounters with the Folklore of the World.” The town’s summer cultural programme is particularly rich, attracting not only Chojnice residents but also visitors from across the region.

2 Methodology

In the analysis of development factors and subproducts of the town of Chojnice, several methods were employed. One of these methods involved analyzing and compiling data obtained from the Local Data Bank, which allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the current demographic and economic situation of the town. Another method used was the SWOT analysis, which involved evaluating various criteria in terms of opportunities, threats, and strengths and weaknesses. In this study, the gathered information was divided into the four aforementioned categories, and a detailed analysis was conducted. This method enables the identification of a path for future actions based on recognized opportunities and strengths, while simultaneously considering the weaknesses and threats, and finding ways to prevent or eliminate their impact.

Additionally, an assessment of the contribution of resources (i.e., natural, human, and capital) in the creation of selected subproducts offered by the town was conducted. The evaluation was based on assigning each subproduct an importance score on a scale of 0 to 5, where a score of 0 represented the weakest rating and 5 represented the highest. The subproducts were grouped according to the classification proposed by Szromnik (2016), as shown in Table 1.

No.	Subproduct	Components of the Subproduct	Markets
1.	Tourist (T)	Accommodation facilities, tourist information, catering, transport companies	Tourists, holidaymakers
2.	Investment (I)	Labor market, raw material resources, premises, human resources	Socio-economic environment, entrepreneurs
3.	Residential (R)	Real estate resources (houses, apartments, plots), communication infrastructure, location of residential estates	Residents of the town and surrounding areas, companies and entrepreneurs
4.	Social (S)	Job opportunities, social offerings	Residents, job seekers

5.	Commercial and Service (C&S)	Availability of services, specialization and assortment, access time, equipment of establishments	Town residents and those from nearby towns
6.	Educational and Cultural (E&C)	Cultural offerings, educational institutions, theaters, cinemas	Parents, youth, social organizations
7.	Trade and Exhibition (T&E)	Trade infrastructure, conference halls, tradition of organizing such events	Entrepreneurs, advertising and marketing agencies
8.	Recreational and Sports (R&S)	Sports facilities, sports events, infrastructure	Youth, sports clubs, active sports enthusiasts, tourists
9.	Public (P)	Administration, public services, communication	Residents, institutions, tourists

Table 1: Classification of Territorial Product into Subproducts.

Source: Own study based on Szromnik (2016).

The assessment of human, natural, and capital resources in the context of their contribution to the creation of local sub-products was carried out based on an independent estimation of their relative significance. The evaluation was conducted using a six-point scale, assigning an appropriate number of points depending on the importance of a given resource in the development of the sub-product or its impact on its quality. The resources were identified on the basis of conducted analyses as well as data and information collected about the town.

3 Results

At first glance, the socio-economic situation in Chojnice appears to be positive. According to data from the Central Statistical Office (GUS) for the year 2024, the town recorded 922 unemployed individuals (accessed on 29.03.2025), which constitutes a small percentage in relation to the total population of the town. According to data from GUS, the unemployment rate among the working-age population of Chojnice in December 2024 stood at 4.2%, a figure comparable to the average rate in the voivodeship (4.6%) and lower than the national average (5.1%). In comparison with the entire Chojnice County, the town performs considerably better, as the county's unemployment rate at the end of 2024 was 8.6% (data from the County Labour Office in Chojnice). This confirms that Chojnice serves as an employment hub not only for its residents but also for inhabitants of neighbouring municipalities, and reflects the town's relatively high level of socio-economic development.

A more significant issue, however, is the growing disparity in the gender and age structure (Figure 2). Currently, individuals over the age of 60 constitute nearly 25% of the total population, while those under the age of 20 make up only 21%.

Unfortunately, an increasingly noticeable problem in the town is the aging population and the outflow of young, educated individuals seeking employment elsewhere. This phenomenon is driven by a low demand for labor in comparison to the number of graduates from schools and universities residing in the town, as well as lower wage rates compared to larger cities in the region. Consequently, fewer educated individuals choose to settle in the town. Chojnice shares this fate with other Polish cities, as there is a noticeable outflow of residents moving to surrounding rural areas while continuing to work in the town. This trend increases the migration balance, particularly for individuals aged 35-50. However, this phenomenon is not yet as prominent due to the ongoing suburbanization of the town and the continuous expansion of its suburbs (Table 2). To address these challenges, the town of Chojnice has developed the Municipal Strategy for Solving Social Problems, which includes diagnostics of key social and demographic issues and strategies for preventing such situations.

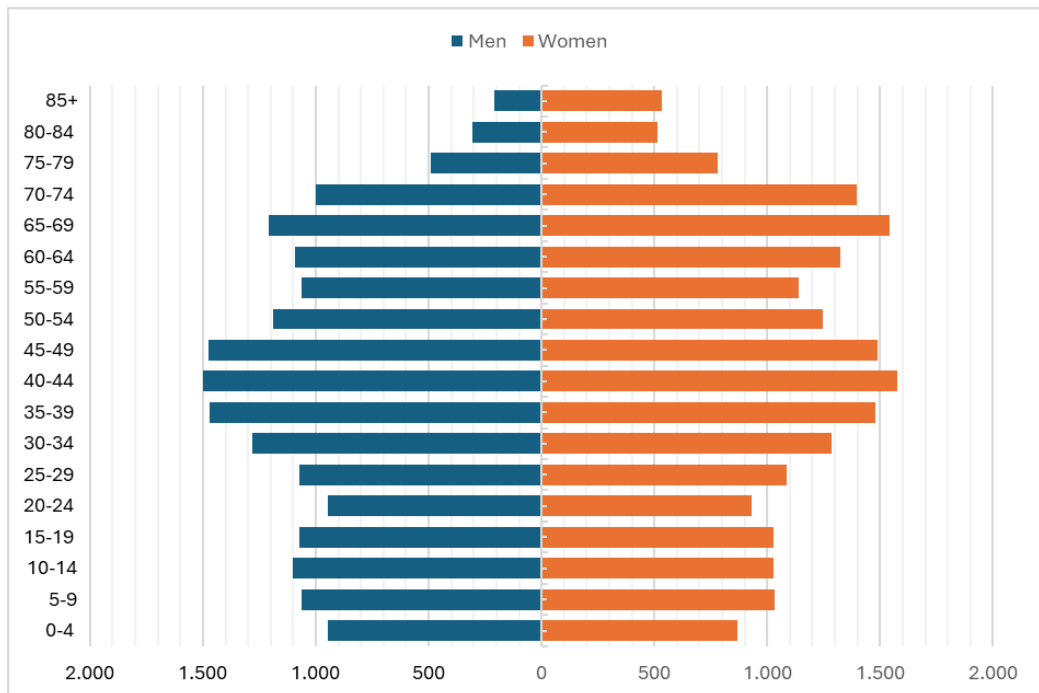


Figure 2: Gender and age structure of the town's population.

Source: Own study based on data from the Local Data Bank - <https://bd1.stat.gov.pl/bd1/start> (accessed on 29.03.2025).

The town of Chojnice has a population of 38,360 residents (as of 31 December 2024, source: Local Data Bank). However, it also serves as a hub of daily life for the wider region, which is why the population decline observed over the years (Fig. 3) is not as evident in the town's day-to-day functioning. According to data obtained from the resources of the Central Statistical Office, the number of inhabitants has been steadily decreasing since 2010.

The town's demographic situation is therefore becoming increasingly challenging. When these figures are compared with the chart illustrating the age and gender structure—showing an alarming trend of population ageing—it can be concluded that, if this trend continues, the town may be facing a demographic crisis in the near future.

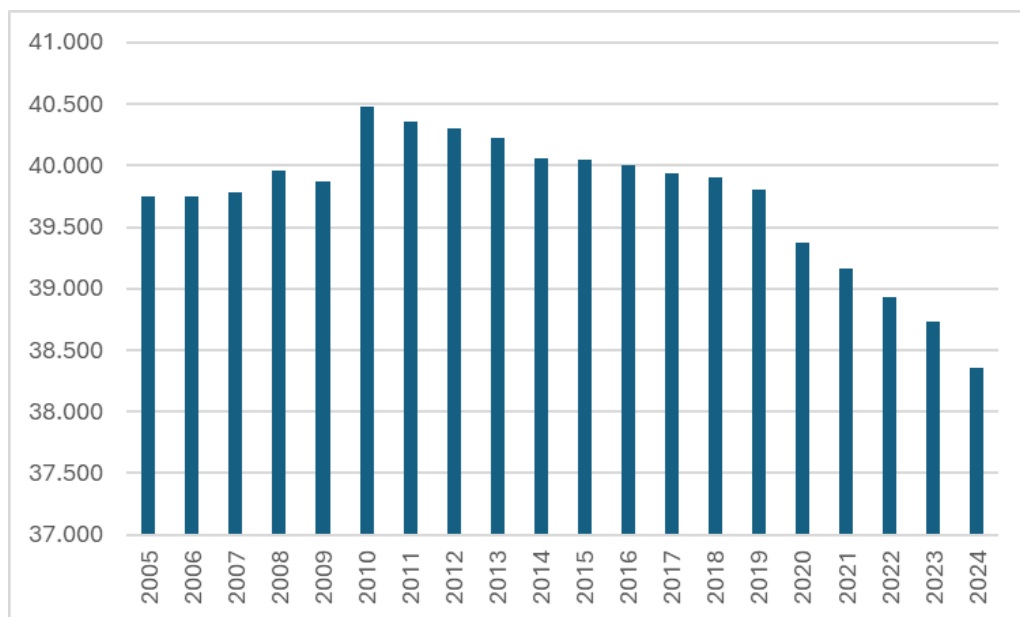


Figure 3: Graph illustrating changes in the population of the town between 2005 and 2024.

Source: Own study based on data from the Local Data Bank - <https://bdl.stat.gov.pl/bdl/start> (accessed on 09.08.2025)

The town of Chojnice faces the challenge of population decline (Fig. 4). In addition to a negative natural population growth, the issue of migration is shaped by two main factors: the outflow of residents to larger urban centres in the region (Gdańsk, Gdynia) and suburban migration beyond the town's administrative boundaries. In the first case, the problem primarily concerns young people who emigrate in pursuit of higher education and due to the desire for professional development in sectors of the economy that are not present in the town. In the second case, migration mainly involves individuals aged 30–45, which results in a loss of municipal budget revenues from residents' taxes. According to the Development Strategy for the Town of Chojnice until 2030, these changes have an impact on the local labour market in the form of reduced labour supply, leading to a decline in the area's competitiveness. Unfortunately, a similar situation is observed in other regions of Poland, where a portion of the population—particularly young people—migrate to larger urban centres, often in central parts of the country, in search of education or employment.

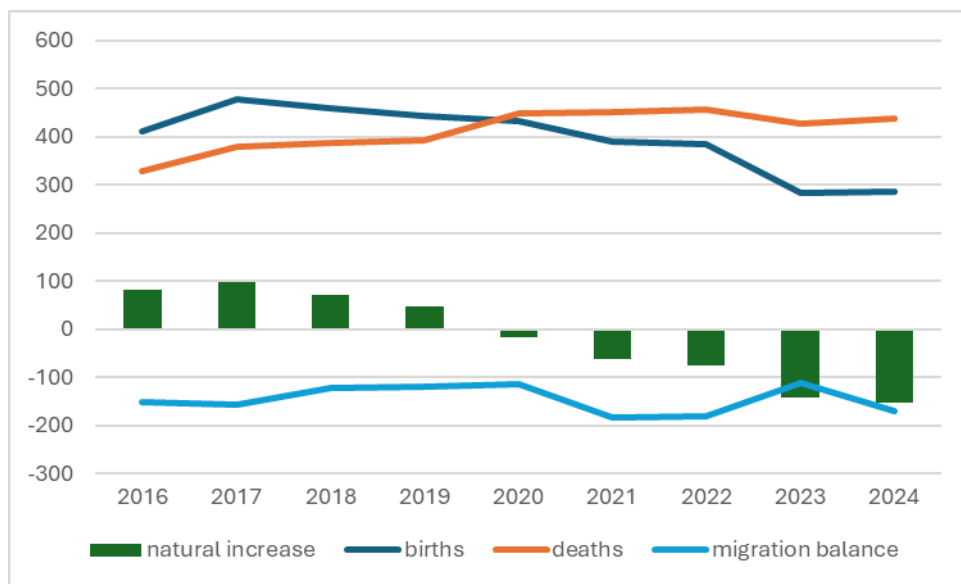


Figure 4: Graph presenting data on the number of births and deaths, natural population growth, and migration balance.

Source: Own study based on data from the Local Data Bank - <https://bdl.stat.gov.pl/bdl/start> (accessed on 09.08.2025).

According to data from the Register of Schools and Educational Institutions of the Ministry of Education and Science, the town of Chojnice hosts 62 educational institutions, including 8 primary schools, 14 secondary schools, and 4 post-secondary schools. The primary schools educate 4,157 pupils, the secondary schools 4,963 students, and the post-secondary institutions 609 students. Among the secondary schools, there are 6 general secondary schools (1,845 students), 5 technical schools (2,480 students), and 3 vocational schools (638 students).

The curriculum of general secondary schools primarily prepares students for higher education; consequently, most graduates leave for universities in other cities. Technical schools, in addition to preparing students for higher education, include professional qualification examinations, while vocational schools provide exclusively occupational qualifications. The vocational profiles offered are diverse, yet they are dominated by electro-mechanical, IT, construction, agricultural, logistics, food and gastronomy, sheet metalworking, carpentry, metalworking, and upholstery skills. This constitutes a relatively narrow and specialised workforce.

However, in the case of Chojnice, where most employment is concentrated in the private sector and the largest enterprises are meat processing plants, fish processing facilities, carpentry workshops, and manufacturers of machinery or steel structures, the demand for new employees is not sufficient to absorb even a significant proportion of the graduates from the town's schools.

The most dynamic sector of the town's economy appears to be the residential and road construction industry. In many parts of the town, new residential buildings are continuously being erected, indicating a high demand for real estate. Similarly, in the field of road construction, both the town and neighboring municipalities have undertaken repairs to improve the poor condition of local roads, largely supported by

external funding opportunities. The majority of residents are employed in private enterprises operating in various sectors of the economy, which reflects a significant economic development of the town.

Opportunities	Zagrożenia
- <i>Well-functioning social welfare programs</i> - <i>Development of the housing and construction market</i> - <i>A large number of private sector enterprises</i> - <i>Industrial development in the suburban zone</i> - <i>Initiatives aimed at mitigating the negative effects of poverty and adverse social conditions</i>	- Aging population - Migration of young, educated individuals - Outflow of residents to surrounding areas - Educational offerings not aligned with the local job market - Lack of development prospects within the town - Absence of a single major employer to drive growth for both residents and the town - High fragmentation of enterprises

Table 2: Opportunities and Threats resulting from the socio-economic situation.
Source: Own elaboration.

Strengths	Opportunities
- Location along National Road 22 and Provincial Roads No. 212, 235, and 240 - Located at a railway junction with lines 203, 208, 210, 201, and 281 - Attractive surroundings for settlement, tourism, and recreation (Tuchola Forest, Charzykowskie Lake, Brda River) - High level of education, with secondary schools being very popular in the region - Diversified structure of business size and industry - Numerous investments improving the investment and settlement attractiveness of the town	- Improving socio-economic conditions for residents - Developing housing market - Investments in the development and improvement of road infrastructure - Investments and development aimed at improving cultural infrastructure - Increasing demand for leisure activities in nature, active recreation, and cultural tourism

Weaknesses	Threats
- Peripheral location within the voivodeship - Surrounding areas of significant natural value, leading to investment limitations - Insufficient number of businesses in sectors with high technological intensity - Low incomes and wealth levels of residents - High municipal budget debt - Weak tourism infrastructure	- Deteriorating environmental conditions in the town, especially air quality during the autumn and winter seasons - Industrial activities migrating to neighboring municipalities due to the decreasing availability of investment land in the town - Difficulty in finding employment after completing education - Migration of young people in search of employment in other areas - Growing, uncontrolled suburbanization of the town

Table 3: SWOT analysis of the town's development factors.

Source: Own elaboration.

SWOT analysis of the factors contributing to the development of the town of Chojnice (Table 3) indicates that the town's development is significantly influenced by the available transportation infrastructure, high levels of education, numerous infrastructure investments, and attractive natural surroundings. Opportunities identified include the rising demand for outdoor recreational activities, a developing housing market, and new investment opportunities. On the other hand, weaknesses and threats include issues such as the town's peripheral location within the region, investment restrictions due to proximity to ecologically valuable areas, the deteriorating environmental conditions (especially air quality during the winter months), low income levels among residents, insufficient tourist infrastructure, and the migration of young people seeking employment elsewhere.

The primary causes of air pollution in the town are so-called low emissions and excessive vehicular traffic. Traffic flow through the town is hindered by an inadequate road network, which results in the concentration of vehicular movement in the town centre. This leads to traffic congestion and generates spatially accumulated linear emissions. Another contributing factor to air pollution is the absence of a district heating network in certain areas of the town, compelling residents to heat their homes using coal- or wood-fired boilers.

Resources	By-produkt								
	T&E	P	S	I	R	T	R&S	C&S	E&C
Natural	3	3	1	2	3	5	5	3	4
Human	3	3	5	4	4	2	3	5	5
Capital	3	4	4	5	4	4	5	5	5

Table 4: Evaluation of the contribution of resources to the creation of subproducts in the town of Chojnice.

Source: Own study.

Each resource plays a different role in the creation of specific subproducts, with some having greater weight and others less, depending on the characteristics of the subproduct (Table 4). Nevertheless, the high contribution of capital resources to each subproduct is assessed (Figure 5), indicating the need for financial investment in the development of each of them. Natural resources play the smallest role, at least in the case of several subproducts.

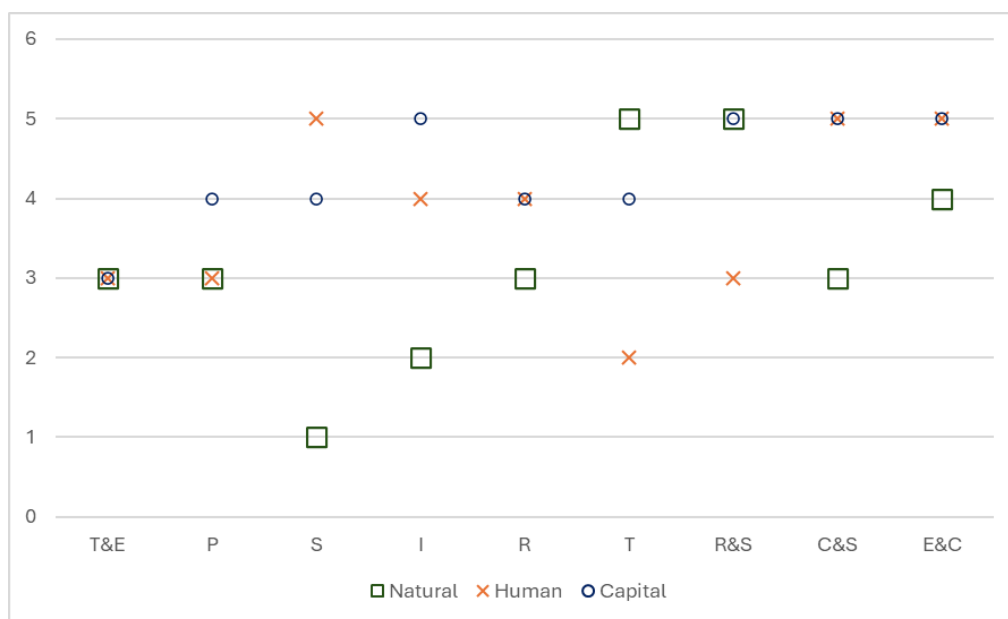


Figure 5: Spectrum chart of the assessment of the subproducts of the town of Chojnice.

Source: Own elaboration.

In the town of Chojnice, it is necessary to develop investment, tourism, and educational-cultural products. The primary goal should be to provide jobs for young people with higher education, who are currently migrating out of the town. Furthermore, investment activities should be undertaken to attract more investors to the town, which will allow the creation of new jobs and strengthen the economy.

4 Conclusion

Small towns face many challenges regarding their development. In the case under consideration, several conclusions can be drawn to help understand the issue of development based on the use of local resources. One of them is the good transportation location and satisfactory condition of the roads, which aligns with Rondinelli's (1983) statement regarding the impact of road investments on the development of small towns.

A concerning fact is the poor air quality in the town, particularly during the winter months. Tripathi and Mitra (2022) note that for small urban centers in India, a healthy climate, alongside infrastructure availability, is a primary factor influencing their development. Given the town's natural surroundings and the nearby protected areas such as the National and Landscape Parks, the poor air quality in the town appears paradoxical. This is likely linked to infrastructural deficiencies, such as inadequate heating networks or the ongoing problem of managing the greatest possible amount of car and transit traffic from the town center.

For Chojnice, a significant problem seems to be the outflow of the population in search of employment. Perhaps a solution would be a partial structural reorganization of the service sector, focusing it on highly specialized services, which, in turn, require higher qualifications, as these sectors tend to develop much faster compared to other sectors of the economy (Emran & Shilpi, 2017). Such an approach would lead to the town's development as well as retain a portion of educated young people who would find employment locally in their field. Similar actions have been taken in the Moravian region, where small towns have undergone a transformation, converting low-innovation sectors into workplaces primarily based on services and cultural tourism (Vaishar et al., 2022).

Chojnice has the necessary resources to develop its tourism services. According to Kowalczyk (2000), environmental resources and natural attractions are considered one of the main factors attracting tourists. Unfortunately, these attractions alone are not enough; there is a need for investments in tourism and accommodation infrastructure to fully exploit the potential shown in the assessment of the contribution of resources to the creation of the tourism subproduct. The town has all the conditions to develop in this direction and attract external funding.

An important issue concerning the analyzed town, as well as most similar urban centers, is the decrease in population and the gradual aging of society. Wirth et al. (2016) note that one alternative for small towns in economic and demographic crises might be adopting the Slow City Strategy and Life Beyond Growth, which focus mainly on factors affecting the quality of life in the town. These strategies may also partially influence the town's tourism popularity.

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Povzetek

Majhna mesta imajo pomembno vlogo pri delovanju lokalnega gospodarstva, saj pogosto služijo kot središča storitvenih dejavnosti in kulturnega življenja v regiji. Imajo velik razvojni potencial in sposobnost prilagajanja sodobnim urbanim razmeram; vendar je ključno, da se osredotočijo na učinkovito rabo lokalnih virov, ki jih imajo na voljo. Takšen pristop lahko bistveno olajša odločanje in zmanjša potrebne finančne vloške. Pomemben vidik je tudi sodelovanje z okoliškimi urbanimi in podeželskimi območji.

Toerien (2018) izpostavlja pojav »paradoksa majhnega mesta«, pri katerem se več središč v regiji razvija z izkoriščanjem posameznih gospodarskih panog (npr. turizma), medtem ko druga, podobna mesta zaostajajo. Posledično se sosednja majhna mesta pogosto medsebojno dopolnjujejo, kar se kaže v pojavu, znanem kot funkcionalna polarizacija (Korcelli-Olejniczak idr., 2022). Ta pojav vključuje medsebojno neizključujoče se dejavnosti v mestih – na primer, nekatera mesta v regiji se usmerjajo v nišne storitve in/ali industrije, medtem ko se druga osredotočajo na zagotavljanje storitev okoliškim podeželskim območjem.

V primeru Chojnic je možnost takšnega "kompromisa" trenutno minimalna, k čemur prispeva njegov status največjega središča na območju. Vendar pa bi se ob investicijskih priložnostih v sosednjih mestih verjetnost takšnega scenarija lahko povečala.

Izvedene analize in ocene vpliva virov na mesto Chojnice kažejo tako njegov potencial in priložnosti kot tudi vidike, ki bi lahko negativno vplivali na njegov razvoj. Pomembno je, da mesto čim bolje izkoristi razpoložljive vire in jih uporabi kot temelj za oblikovanje lokalnih produktov, ki bodo gonilo njegovega razvoja.