

# NOTAS ECONÓMICAS 7

**ALAIN LIPIETZ** LE MONDE DE L'APRÈS-FORDISME

**TONY CULYER** O IMPACTO DA ECONOMIA DA SAÚDE NAS POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

**PEDRO NOGUEIRA RAMOS** MECANISMOS DE TRANSMISSÃO MONETÁRIA: UMA ANÁLISE COM BASE EM DADOS ESPACIAIS

**HORÁCIO CRESPO FAUSTINO** COMÉRCIO INTRA-SECTORIAL E VANTAGENS COMPARATIVAS ENTRE PORTUGAL E ESPANHA (1983-1992)

**MARIA ISABEL R. T. SOARES** IRREVERSIBILIDADE E DIFERIMENTO DE INVESTIMENTOS PRODUTIVOS

**CARLOS TENREIRO** SMEs IN EUROPE: THERE'S NO BUSINESS LIKE SMALL BUSINESS

**JOÃO SOUSA ANDRADE** CONFUSÕES À VOLTA DA UNIFICAÇÃO MONETÁRIA EUROPEIA

**PAULINO TEIXEIRA** EMPREGO E TRANSFORMAÇÃO DA ECONOMIA

REVISTA DA FACULDADE DE ECONOMIA DA UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA



## SMEs in Europe: there's no business like small business

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resumo

résumé / abstract

**Em Dezembro de 1992, a Comissão Europeia criou um Observatório europeu para as PME a fim de permitir a todos os responsáveis políticos dispor de uma avaliação detalhada da evolução e perspectivas de desenvolvimento das empresas na economia europeia. Desde então, a "European Network for SME Research" tem procedido à elaboração de um relatório anual independente sobre as pequenas e médias empresas. O presente artigo tem como objectivo apresentar, sucinta e criticamente, alguns dos principais resultados desses relatórios, num número limitado de domínios. Em geral, considera que as pequenas e médias empresas são o veículo mais importante para gerar novas possibilidades de emprego e crescimento, assim como para reforçar a coesão económica e social e sustentar o desenvolvimento regional na União Europeia. Em particular, faz uso dos dados publicados pelo Observatório para rever o estado actual das PME na União Europeia, avaliar a sua contribuição para a criação de emprego, e apreciar, a título ilustrativo, o impacto de alguns desenvolvimentos relativos ao mercado interno sobre as PME. Finalmente, termina considerando que as medidas de política e mecanismos de apoio às pequenas e médias empresas não necessitam de tomar explicitamente em consideração a dimensão da empresa, devendo antes orientar-se para a criação e desenvolvimento de um quadro económico global coerente e transparente, no âmbito do qual todos os operadores possam competir livremente com base num tratamento não discriminatório.**

En Décembre 1992, la Commission européenne a établi un Observatoire européen pour la PME afin de permettre à tous les décideurs politiques de disposer d'un instrument d'appréciation des développements et des perspectives des entreprises dans l'économie européenne. Depuis lors, le "European Network for SME Research" a été chargé de rédiger un rapport annuel indépendant sur les petites et moyennes entreprises.

Cet article vise à présenter un résumé succinct et annoté des principaux résultats des rapports dans un nombre limité de domaines. En général, il considère que les petites et moyennes entreprises sont le secteur clé pour la relance de l'emploi et de la croissance, ainsi que pour renforcer la cohésion économique et sociale et soutenir le développement régional dans l'Union européenne. Il utilise notamment les données statistiques et les estimations publiées par l'Observatoire pour rendre compte de l'état actuel des PME dans l'Union européenne, évaluer leur contribution à la création d'emplois, et apprécier, à titre préliminaire, l'impact de certains développements relatifs au marché intérieur sur les PME. Enfin, il se termine en considérant que les mesures politiques et les mécanismes ciblés de soutien aux PME ne nécessitent pas de prendre explicitement en considération la taille de l'entreprise, mais doivent plutôt être dirigés vers la création et le développement d'un environnement cohérent et transparent dans lequel tous les acteurs économiques puissent librement concurrencer sur la base d'un traitement non discriminatoire.

In December 1992, the European Commission set up a European Observatory for SMEs in order to provide all relevant policy-makers with a comprehensive survey of enterprise developments and prospects in the European economy. Since then, the European Network for SME Research has been charged of drafting an annual, independent report on small and medium-sized enterprises.

The present paper aims to present a short, annotated summary of the reports' major findings in a limited number of domains. In general, it considers that small and medium-sized enterprises are the key issue for generating employment opportunities and growth, as well as for maintaining social and economic cohesion and assisting regional development in the European Union. In particular, it makes use of statistical data and estimates published by the Observatory to review the current state of SMEs in the European Union, evaluate their contribution towards employment creation, and tentatively assess the impact of some Internal Market related developments on SMEs. Finally, it ends up by considering that properly targeted policy measures and support mechanisms need not take explicitly into account the enterprise size, but have instead to be geared towards providing a coherent and transparent framework within which all economic operators can freely compete on the basis of non-discriminatory treatment.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>



For decades, the key to economic success seemed to lie within the very foundations of the growth attitude adopted by the most developed countries. Not only were economic growth and economic development seen as two faces of the same coin, as growth by itself was generally believed to deliver ever-increasing levels of progress, prosperity, employment, opportunities and well-being. Appropriately as it then was, empirical evidence seemed to confirm that industrial growth alone would ensure increased efficiency in resource allocation, and allow for rational use of all production factors, technologies and methods, while continuously making room for additional reductions in unit costs.

The early seventies have nonetheless witnessed the dismissal of the common orthodoxy. On the one hand, a few oil crises added to the already recognisable dismal of the industrial “development poles” model by underlining the fundamental importance of flexibility and ability to adapt to new and unforeseen conditions, and dramatically reducing the scope for traditional economies of scale. On the other hand, the rapid emergence and diffusion of an array of new and pervasive technologies contributed to further reduce the comparative advantages of large firms, and paved the way to development of customisation, as opposed to mass production, of consumer goods.

The reported exhaustion of the traditional industrial development model has brought about some major changes in economic policy, propelled as they were by rapid expansion of the tertiary sector and considerable change in the pattern of industrial output. Not only have new concerns about structural shifts in the sectoral economic balance and the cohesion of the industrial fabric been added to long-standing commitment towards short-term market regulation, as enterprise policy has gradually replaced industrial policy as the most effective tool for addressing and reconciling such general objectives as growth, employment and competitiveness in a globalised economy.

By establishing a “Bureau de rapprochement des entreprises” (BRE) in 1973, launching a “European Year of Small Businesses and Crafts” in 1983, and creating a “SME Task-Force”, which subsequently developed into an independent Directorate-General, in 1986, the European Commission proved to be one of the few institutions who paid early attention to the increasing economic importance of small firms. And, in the process, it eventually made clear (European Commission, 1990) that a suitable instrument was needed to assist it in pursuing its enterprise policy, particularly in finding out more about the situation and prospects of small and medium-sized enterprises by improving their statistical coverage and analysing the impact the Internal Market would have on them.

In December 1992, therefore, the Commission set up a European Observatory for SMEs, which then, for the first time, brought together twelve national organisations specialising in small and medium-sized enterprises (and which last year has been extended to cover also new European Union members and Norway), in order to provide all relevant policy-makers with an annual report on the latest enterprise developments and prospects in the European economy, quite often in areas where data is scarce but vital for any effective analysis. Considering that the neutrality and the scientific character of data-processing procedures that preside over the development of statistical data, and are ensured both by EUROSTAT and the National Statistical Offices should be matched by a comparable independence of the Observatory, the Commission deemed it best to restrict its role to that of a catalyst. The contents of the reports and the methodology used in this regard are the responsibility of the European Network for SME Research (ENSR), which prepares them, with the Commission merely setting out the guidelines and monitoring the network's activities.

<sup>1</sup> A shorter, colloquial version of this paper has been presented at the EBN (European Business and Innovation Centre Network) Symposium on “The financing of innovative SMEs in the European Union” (Brussels, 22-23 February 1996). The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not engage the European Commission.