

To cite this article: Vinci, I. (2019). Governing the Metropolitan Dimension: A Critical Perspective on Institutional Reshaping and Planning Innovation in Italy, *European Journal of Spatial Development*, 70. Available from: <http://doi.org/10.30689/EJSD2019:70.1650-9544>

Online publication date: February 2019

Publication details, including instructions for authors:
<http://www.nordregio.org/ejsd>
Indexed in Scopus, DOAJ and EBSCO

Governing the Metropolitan Dimension:

A Critical Perspective on Institutional Reshaping and Planning Innovation in Italy

Ignazio Vinci

Abstract

As in other European countries, over recent decades the question of metropolitan government has captured political and academic attention in Italy too. The debate has been recently fuelled by a national reform introduced to create 14 metropolitan authorities to provide for new government solutions in the territories of the larger urban areas. Based on literature and empirical observation, this paper presents a critical view of that process by examining the following questions: How do metropolitan areas relate to broader Italian urban policy? How does the reform contribute to a reshaping of multi-level governance through national and local initiatives? And how does institutional reorganisation address territorial diversity? Based on the critical understanding of these issues presented in this paper, it is argued that several obstacles still need to be overcome before metropolitan government can be properly established and institutionally effective.

Keywords: *Italy, Urban Policy, Metropolitan Areas, Spatial Planning, Territorial Governance*

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1. Introduction

Large cities have always played a prominent role in European identity, as witnessed by the pioneering work of urban sociologists like George Simmel and Max Weber. However, despite their role in the modern history of Europe, it was only in the last four decades of the twentieth century that the government of large cities came to be considered as a prominent political question and the concept of metropolitan area was widely adopted by European countries.

Between the 1960s and 1980s, the earliest initiatives to create a formal metropolitan level of government were undertaken in countries with very different administrative organisations (Balchin et al., 1999; CEC, 1997; Davies et al., 1989; Newman and Thornley, 1996): highly regionalised countries such as Germany, Spain and Italy, as well as countries with a more centralised and hierarchical government structure, such as France, the UK and Portugal (Bobbio, 2002; Keating, 1991; Jouve and Lefèvre, 2002). At that stage, as underlined by Lefèvre (1998, p. 11), the key government reform question to be addressed at metropolitan level was presented as ‘a search for correspondence between the functional territory (the urban area) and the institutional territory (the existing local government structure)’. Given that metropolitan government was intended to be an instrument to decentralise State power in certain policy areas of urban relevance (such as local welfare, housing and public transport), the debate leading to the reforms had focused predominantly on the issues of administrative efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of local services (Bobbio, 2002; Keating, 1991).

Following attempts to apply this sort of rational model to the functions of the metropolitan authorities, which were often unsuccessful in many countries (Lefèvre, 1998), discussions about metropolitan government gained new momentum from the 1990s, when processes such as globalisation and the rise of the European Union prompted the emergence of new forms of territorial organisation (Amin and Thrift, 1994; Brenner, 1999, 2004; Hooghe, 1996; Marks et al., 1996; Le Galès, 2002; Savitch and Kantor, 2002). Highlighting the difference from urban development in the Fordist era, Tosics (2007) argued that contemporary urban agglomerations in Europe must deal with two separate but interconnected types of challenges. These are internal challenges, to control the negative spillovers of the metropolitan dimension at an urban level through the containment of urban sprawl and a more effective coordination of functions to improve citizens’ quality of life; and external challenges, to achieve a critical mass – in terms of agglomeration, economies of scale and industrial specialisation – in order to compete globally, according to the ‘new regionalism’ paradigm (Herrschel, 2014; MacLeod, 2001; Scott, 2001; Scott and Storper, 2003).

In the last 15 years, the interplay between these processes at different territorial scales has led to a large corpus of reflection about metropolitan development in Europe and related analysis. This growing interest extended the literature in terms of ways of looking at metropolitan processes and morphologies, with conceptual implications; for instance,

the term ‘metropolitan area’ is now often associated with ‘urban region’, ‘city region’ and ‘metropolitan region’, depending on whether the emphasis is on spatial, economic or organisational aspects of metropolitan development (Parr, 2005; Rodríguez-Pose, 2008).

While it is not easy to provide a systematic review of the literature in such a field, given the aim of this paper, it is useful to identify two main groups of contributions. The first group predominantly focuses on the spatial and socio-economic morphologies of the new metropolitan processes underway in Europe. A substantial proportion of this work focuses on developing the analytical parameters and tools to identify metropolitan areas in Europe. A central concept is the ‘functional urban area’ (ESPON, 2005; ESPON, 2007; Eurostat, 2013; OECD, 2012), which has been pervasively adopted by the EU to promote its vision of polycentric development of the European territory (Adams et al., 2006; Faludi and Waterhout, 2002). Other works provide different interpretations of the evolutionary patterns of city/urban regions: the emergence of global city regions based on regional innovation processes (Hall and Pain, 2006); the environmental effects of suburbanisation and urban sprawl (Couch et al., 2008); the impact of demographic change on metropolitan dynamics (Gløersen et al., 2016); and economic restructuring and urban shrinkage (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012).

By contrast, a second broad group aims to discover and analyse the implications of the spatial, socio-economic and political transformation of European urban areas for policy and planning practices. In this strand, most authors advocate the emergence of new, more relational, governance settings to address the metropolitan dimension of government (Albrechts et al., 2001; Healey, 1997; Herrschel and Newman, 2003; Salet et al., 2003). Given that it is related to the international debate on ‘new institutionalism’ (for a review see Sorensen, 2017), an important part of this literature also argues for a radical revision of the planning approach to governing metropolitan development, emphasising the importance of collaborative practices and planning as a result of open and flexible governance relations (Albrechts et al., 2003; Healey, 2007; Healey et al., 1997). The shaping of metropolitan government is seen here as the product of a strategic process involving a plurality of actors in the regional space. Strategic (spatial) plans, therefore, are also seen conceptually as an instrument to provide metropolitan government with the legitimacy to perform functions that were previously addressed in a rational and hierarchical way (Albrechts, 2004; Oosterlynck et al., 2010; Salet and Faludi, 2000; Salet and Gualini, 2006).

The references above highlight two interrelated questions that also form the backdrop to the analyses presented in this paper. First, how to define metropolitan areas from a spatial and a functional perspective, considering the complexity of the urbanisation processes affecting the contemporary urban regions? Second, how to provide effective planning instruments to address urban policy’s metropolitan dimension in the context of increasing institutional fragmentation?

In Italy, the challenge of addressing these questions represents one of several reasons for the controversial effects of a reform recently implemented by the national government (Law 56/2014, also known as the

Delrio Reform) to establish a metropolitan level of government within the national institutional system. The reform formally created 14 metropolitan authorities – Metropolitan Cities – with a broad range of planning competencies for the implementation of policy at inter-municipal level. However, many political and operational difficulties are being encountered in the process of empowering such metropolitan authorities, including a constitutional referendum held in December 2016 to confirm the provinces (a territorial level to be replaced by the metropolitan authorities in the largest urban areas). This event has resulted in a stalemate in terms of the implementation of the reform.

Against this problematic background, this paper provides a critical description of the often controversial processes accompanying the institutionalisation of metropolitan areas in Italy. Following this introduction, the second section of this paper provides a brief review of the national debate regarding the problem of large cities and the lack of an explicit urban policy in recent Italian history. The third section describes three different ways in which metropolitan government is being implemented within the national system: the planning competencies given to the Metropolitan Cities by the Delrio Reform; the attempts to execute strategic planning at the new metropolitan level; and the innovation process deriving from the implementation of a programme to address the EU's urban agenda in the metropolitan areas. The conclusion focuses on two main issues that, in my opinion, still need to be addressed by policy to provide effective metropolitan government: the problem of heterogeneity of urban-regional development in the country; and the lack of multi-level governance.

2. Urban policy and large cities in Italy: a review of the recent debate

Despite the fact that medium-large cities have historically driven the spatial and economic organisation of the country (Bonaverio et al., 1999; Martinotti, 1999), it was only in the last quarter of the twentieth century that urban areas found a clear space in the national political agenda in Italy. Such interest in cities started to grow in the 1990s as a consequence of two different types of initiative:

- legislative reforms aimed at decentralising power to city-local governments and paying greater attention to urban areas in the national policy-making process;
- programmes and incentives to stimulate local initiatives in line with EU practices related to urban areas.

Examples of the first type of initiative include the 1990 reform of local government (Law N. 142), which reformulated the level of government that transcends local authorities by providing the provinces with greater competencies and by introducing metropolitan areas into the national institutional system. While this reform element remained largely unimplemented (see next section), a further reform of local government introduced in 1993 (Law N. 81) resulted in a series of relevant changes for the empowerment of city government. For instance, the direct election of mayors and their greater powers over the city councils provided

increased political stability to local government, accompanied by the emergence of new political leadership and a managerialisation of policy-making at local authority level (Vandelli, 2000; Vesperini, 2000). The role of these reforms in stimulating the emergence of a new urban political agenda in the 1990s has been underlined by many Italian scholars (Cremaschi, 2003; Palermo, 2002; Pasqui, 2005).

This literature also relates the emergence of an urban policy in the 1990s to a series of programmes that the Italian government launched to stimulate sustainable urban regeneration at municipal level. These national initiatives include programmes such as Urban Recovery Programmes (Programmi di Recupero Urbano – 1993), Urban Renewal Programmes (Programmi di Riqualificazione Urbana – 1994), Neighbourhood Contracts (Contratti di Quartiere – 1997) and the Urban Renewal and Sustainable Territory Development Programmes (Programmi di Riqualificazione Urbana e Sviluppo Sostenibile del Territorio – 1999). Due to the incentives provided by these various initiatives, over a short space of time, hundreds of Italian cities experimented with new ways of tackling urban regeneration according to paradigms and approaches promoted by the EU (i.e. through the Urban Initiative) (Avarello and Ricci, 2000; Ombuen et al., 2000).

After more than a decade of planning experiments, however, there is not unanimous agreement that the innovative programmes introduced in the 1990s represented a structural change in the way the public sector addresses urban problems. In the last few years, several analyses (Calafati, 2009, 2014; Cittalia, 2013; Dematteis, 2011; Urban@it, 2016) have argued that these programmes don't represent a coherent national orientation to support city development, although they recognise that such initiatives mark a turning point in the way urban problems are being addressed in the country.

Allulli and Tortorella (2013) provide a related explanation. Starting with the interpretation provided by van den Berg et al. (1998; 2007) and further developed by d'Albergo (2010), they describe the efforts to address urban issues faced by Italian governments as a combination of 'explicit' and 'implicit' national policies with various 'direct' and 'indirect' effects on cities' problems. In particular, they argue that these efforts had an extremely limited impact on the urban question for two main reasons: (1) because they cannot be described as a coordinated policy, reflecting sectoral and fragmented political priorities; and (2) because they represent incremental adaptation to imperatives and paradigms determined at the European level (Allulli and Tortorella, 2013, p. 13).

In addition, the authors identify the main obstacle to the emergence of a national urban agenda as lying 'in the process of regionalization and, on the other hand, (paradoxically) in the strongly institutionalized role of municipal authorities, which are seen by national government as policy takers rather than policy makers' (Allulli and Tortorella, 2013, p. 13). Similar arguments are presented by Vinci (2014), who argues that the strong role attributed to the regional level of government – especially after the reform of Title V of the Constitution, introduced in 2001 (Cammelli, 2011) – has resulted in increasing tension between different

levels of the institutional hierarchy, leading to a fragmentation of responsibilities, a lack of progress towards a national urban agenda and a problematic mainstreaming of the EU's 'urban approach' (Vinci, 2016).

The negative effect of institutional fragmentation for urban policy is a central topic in Calafati and Veneri's (2010; 2013) analysis. They argue that the intense process of demographic and economic polarisation in the urban areas since the 1950s have not been accompanied by adequate institutional adaptations. The direct consequence of what they call an 'institutional lock-in' is that 'the functional organisation of the Italian territory, at least since the mid-1970s, no longer matches the spatial structure of the policy-making process' (Calafati and Veneri, 2010, p. 8). This discrepancy has obstructed the development potential embedded within the Italian urban system, with serious implications for the country's development and for the emergence of what other works describe as a contemporary 'urban question' (Calafati, 2009, 2014).

Such critical perspectives argue that special attention should be given to larger Italian cities. After many years of silence, the debate around the creation of metropolitan government has undoubtedly generated new interest around this question and considerable analysis from different perspectives. Several works published in recent years (Calafati, 2014; 2016; Dematteis, 2011; Urban@it, 2016; Vitali, 2014) agree on the existence of a clear paradox: while larger Italian cities are home to around one-third of the country's population and to the main economic processes (Cittalia, 2013), they have never been the focus of an explicit national strategy as in other European countries (for instance, France).

The implications of this absence of political attention, in the light of increasing interdependence among cities and regions, are well explained by Dematteis (2011). He argues that a strategy for larger cities is justified given the risk of ungoverned urban regions being unable to address the negative effects of the following two interconnected processes:

- *vertical disarticulation*, as certain economic players (such as multinationals) pursue strategies with no (or limited) consideration of local interests;
- *horizontal disarticulation*, resulting from development strategies implemented by individual local authorities, which do not align to their wider urban systems.

For instance, the lack of policy coordination at metropolitan level means that the traditional role of 'regulator' (of development) of local government is increasingly replaced by the role of simple 'mediator' between global and local interests (Dematteis, 2011). Unregulated or weakly regulated activism of individual actors (both public and private) in the regional space might lead to several conflicts (for instance in relation to land development), resulting in increasing institutional fragmentation or, in the words of Dematteis, a 'decentralised' geography of power. In another analysis (Urban@it, 2016), this phenomenon is described as an 'implosion-explosion' of the relationship between the inherited administrative boundaries and the geographies generated by social, economic, environmental and political processes underway within urban regions, resulting in increased conflict between territories and institutions.

The lack of policy aimed at reducing institutional fragmentation impacts on several dimensions of territorial development, including urban sprawl, infrastructure congestion and rising housing costs. In relation to rising housing costs, Bellicini (2011) provides evidence of limited correlation between demographic changes within the largest cities and the real estate boom that took place in several metropolitan areas in the 2000s. Other analyses demonstrate that the rise in housing stock in the last decade is extremely weakly correlated with the social rearticulation of urban areas, given the growing number of families with no (direct or indirect) public support to access social housing (Baldini and Poggio, 2014; CDP, 2014; Cecodhas, 2012; Nomisma, 2010).

Focusing on the environmental implications of territorial disorder, other scholars such as Lanzani (2014) argue that the emergence of a 'metropolitan question' in Italy should not be separated from the relevant urbanisation processes that took place in the urban regions, which is a clear consequence of the laissez-faire approach to spatial policy over several decades. Accordingly, after decades of uncontrolled sprawl, especially at the urban fringes, in several parts of Italy we now see a new form of metropolis that is characterised by almost unlimited spatial boundaries (Balducci et al., 2017), with consequences beyond just the ecological dimension. This uncontrolled development is also criticised by Secchi (2010), who defines the Italian territory as 'near to collapse' and advocates an urgent urban agenda based on policy principles such as stopping soil consumption, re-establishing ecological cycles and re-using abandoned physical capital.

3. In search of metropolitan government/governance

Metropolitan areas are not new in the Italian administrative system, as they were first created in 1990 under Law 142 (for a debate during that period, see: Urbani, 1988; Costa e Toniolo, 1992). This law identified nine metropolitan areas based on the largest Italian cities, in addition to the four identified by the Sicily and Sardinia regions due to their special legislative autonomy¹. Law 142 also granted the regions the ability to define the boundaries of metropolitan areas, after a consultation process involving the respective provinces and municipalities. After years of inertia, as regions and municipalities feared losing power to metropolitan authorities, a series of legal interventions (Law 265/1999; Law 42/2009) finally delegated to provinces the competencies over metropolitan areas. This decision put an end to the idea of establishing new and autonomous metropolitan authorities based on Law 142/1990 (Mobilio, 2017; Tortorella and Allulli, 2014).

Obviously, given the results of this long legislative process (Vandelli and Vitali, 2014), the problem of governing metropolitan development largely remained unresolved. However, renewed attention was prompted in the late 2000s, when the search for institutional solutions to address metropolitan government was accompanied – and in some ways stimulated – by the implementation of a series of governance and planning initiatives at metropolitan level. This ultimately led to the 2014

Delrio Reform. This section discusses three key issues connected to this reform:

- governing and spatial organisation of the new metropolitan authorities;
- the shift in the planning approach to address the metropolitan dimension;
- the implementation of the European urban agenda at the metropolitan level.

3.1 Governing and spatial organisation of the new metropolitan authorities

The 14 metropolitan authorities created by the Delrio Reform (Law 56/2014) resulted in significant changes compared with Law 142/1990. As the earlier reform had proved ineffective, the Delrio Reform adopted a different approach: metropolitan cities were to be (a) directly identified by the State with (b) a territory that coincides with that of its related provinces². In such cases, the province is replaced by the Metropolitan City and the reform is considered to be a move towards abolishing provinces within the national institutional system (Cammelli, 2011).



Figure 1: The 14 Metropolitan Cities in Italy with their respective institutional boundaries. In dark grey the perimeters of the 20 regions (Source: Author)

Other important features of the reform relate to the political dimension of metropolitan government. Based on the idea of simplifying the political process to empower the new authorities, the Metropolitan Cities are led by a ‘metropolitan mayor’ who overlaps with the mayor of the capital city. The governmental process is also supported by a metropolitan council and a metropolitan conference. The council is composed of a certain number of elected representatives (between 14 and 24), drawn from the mayors and local councillors, who support the metropolitan mayor in their budget, planning and regulatory decision-making. The conference comprises the mayors of all the municipalities within the metropolitan area, and functions roughly like a parliament, deliberating policy and government proposals presented by the mayor and metropolitan council. It may also propose its own political initiatives.

Table 1: The spatial and demographic profile of the Italian Metropolitan Cities
(Source: Italian National Institute of Statistics, 2018)

Metropolitan Cities	Population (Jan 2018)	Surface (km²)	Density (In./km²)	Number of municipalities	Population capital city	% population capital city
Rome	4,355,725	5,363	812	121	2,872,800	66.0
Milan	3,234,658	1,575	2,053	134	1,366,180	42.2
Naples	3,101,002	1,178	2,630	92	966,144	31.2
Turin	2,269,120	6,827	332	312	882,523	38.9
Palermo	1,260,193	5,009	252	82	668,405	53.0
Bari	1,257,520	3,862	326	41	323,370	25.7
Catania	1,109,888	3,573	311	58	311,620	28.1
Florence	1,013,260	3,513	288	41	380,948	37.6
Bologna	1,011,291	3,702	273	55	389,261	38.5
Venice	853,552	2,472	345	44	261,321	30.6
Genoa	844,957	1,833	461	67	580,097	68.7
Messina	631,297	3,266	193	108	234,293	37.1
Reggio Calabria	551,212	3,210	172	97	181,447	32.9
Cagliari	431,955	1,248	346	17	154,106	35.7

The governing functions devolved to Metropolitan Cities cover a range of policy areas based on merging previous regional, provincial and municipal powers. Therefore, they are greater in scope than those devolved to metropolitan areas by the 1990 reform, and cover the following areas:

- strategic planning and spatial planning;
- coordination of transport and mobility services;
- coordination and management of services of metropolitan relevance (e.g. secondary education, culture and environment);
- promotion and coordination of development policy.

These increased responsibilities reflect the stronger and direct management role now attributed to metropolitan authorities – instead of a simple coordinating role – in some key policy areas that are relevant for sustainable development, such as planning, environmental protection and mobility.

However, the scope of these competencies is not defined by national law. Instead, it is defined by a series of regional laws and, in particular, by the statutes approved by each metropolitan authority between 2014 and 2016. Based on an initial comparative analysis of such local metropolitan statutes (Mobilio, 2017; Vandelli, 2014; Vandelli and Morisi, 2017), it is clear that they were drafted by metropolitan councils with a certain degree of flexibility in order to shape the deliberative processes and governing tools to cater to different local requirements.

The national law makes provision for such local statutes to address an important choice regarding the spatial development dimension: whether or not to divide the Metropolitan City territory into ‘homogeneous zones’. Such zones are intended to have common functional features (e.g. the core inner city, groups of neighbouring municipalities, etc.) and to be represented in the governance/government structure of the Metropolitan Cities to address specific development policies.

Such a policy choice is reflected in the statutes of Turin and Milan, which have designated 11 and 7 homogeneous zones respectively. Other metropolitan authorities (e.g. Bologna) decided to keep alive their existing networks between local authorities, such as the ‘council unions’ (Unioni di Comuni). Although the governance structure has not yet been defined throughout Italy (e.g. in Sicily the statutes are not yet approved), it has been argued (Urban@it, 2016) that the national framework has led to two different styles of metropolitan government: (1) a soft interpretation of metropolitan powers, mostly based on priorities such as cooperation and subsidiarity; and (2) stronger government based on a more explicit hierarchical decision-making process. In other words, the reform implementation to date reflects a complex set of government/governance relations within the national institutional sub-system, given the highly regionalised structure of the country (Vinci, 2014), and the importance attached at national policy level to voluntary cooperation between local authorities over the last two decades (Governa and Salone, 2004).

Furthermore, such government/governance relations are particularly relevant where the boundaries of Metropolitan Cities do not correspond to the spatial configurations of related metropolitan areas. The six maps in figure 2 show this clearly.

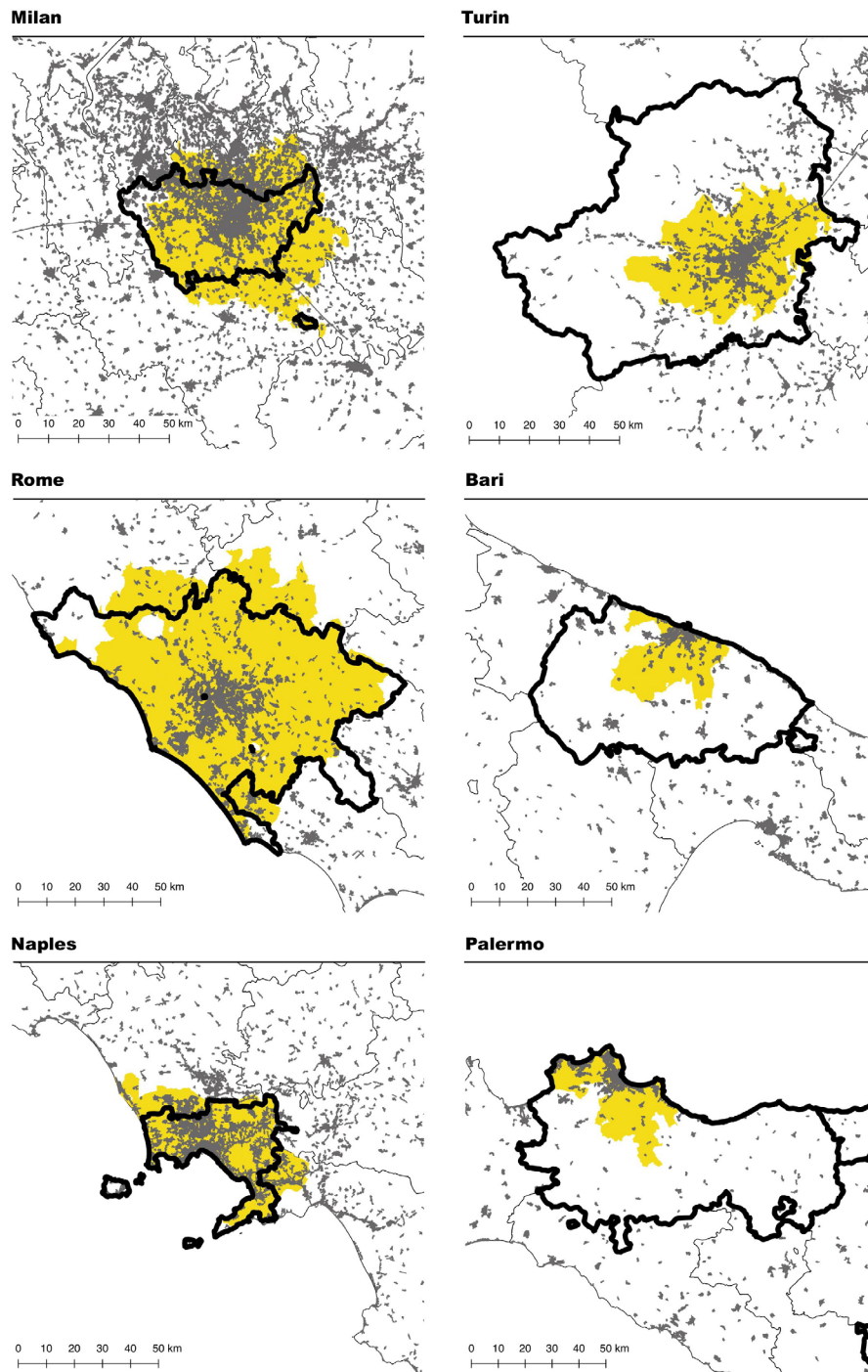


Figure 2: Overlapping between boundaries of the Metropolitan City (black), OECD Functional Urban Area 2016 (yellow) and urbanised area according to CORINE Land Cover 2012 (grey)

In the cases of Turin, Bari and Palermo, urban development is mostly concentrated in the regional capital cities, with large rural areas surrounding the core city. Dozens and even hundreds of municipalities (as in the case of Turin) have only weak or no spatial/functional relationships with the main city. By contrast, in the cases of Milan, Rome and Naples, these large capital cities are surrounded by significant conurbations housing millions of people/commuters (Cittalia, 2013), which can encompass several provinces, or – as in the case of Milan – can even encompass the territory of other regions. This provides further evidence in support of the need for flexible governance arrangements to effectively address metropolitan government in contemporary urban regions, as is the case in other European countries, and highlighted by the literature reviewed in the first section.

However, in order to fully implement the Delrio Reform, we should not ignore the adverse impact of the constitutional referendum held in December 2016. The referendum was called to approve a series of reforms previously passed by the national parliament, including the abolishment of provinces as the main intermediate level of government between cities and regions. Failing to achieve a majority of votes for the reforms, the referendum left the current institutional system unchanged; in other words, provinces and metropolitan authorities now coexist in larger cities with unclear and overlapping government powers (Mobilio, 2017).

3.2 Strategic planning at the metropolitan level: from voluntary to top-down approach?

Of those competencies delegated to metropolitan authorities, the practice of strategic planning is relatively new to local governments in Italy. According to the Delrio Reform, each metropolitan authority must adopt a compulsory strategic plan aimed at providing guidelines to promote economic and social development in each metropolitan area. What is meant by strategic planning has been elaborated within the statutes of several metropolitan authorities (Donati, 2016; Perulli, 2015), which detail specific aspects of the decision-making process to create a strategic plan or what it should address: how the participation of local authorities and local stakeholders will be ensured; the scope of development objectives in relation to different territorial scales (European, national, regional and local); and how these strategic plans will be integrated with the (general and sectoral) policies that are the responsibility of the metropolitan authority. At the end of 2018 only four metropolitan authorities (Milan, Turin, Genoa and Bologna) had completed the political process to approve their own strategic plan.

While a systematic evaluation of these plans is not yet possible, many of these large urban areas have nevertheless undertaken previous strategic planning exercises since the end of the 1990s. These planning activities, as underlined in the literature (Bertuglia et al., 2004; Cavenago, 2004; Fedeli and Gastaldi, 2004; Martinelli, 2005; Bartaletti, 2009), were understood by the cities as (a) a way to innovate local governance through the formulation of a shared vision of development that was agreed with the community and local stakeholders, and (b) an instrument to create integrated action plans to address sustainable urban development challenges from different and multisectoral perspectives.

In Turin, after a first strategic plan was launched by the city (2000), its second strategic plan (2006) was prepared with the help of a large public-private partnership, in order to explicitly address how to govern the metropolitan area. Other similar planning exercises were carried out in Milan (2007) (Balducci et al., 2011), on the initiative of the former province, and in Bologna (2013). In Bologna the strategic plan was supported by a complex governance structure including institutions (i.e. regions, provinces and municipalities) and public-private stakeholders (trade unions, business associations, etc.). Representing the result of large public-private partnerships and reflecting varying geographical

configurations, these plans generally focused on a wide range of development issues from ‘traditional’ topics for spatial strategic planning (such as integrated mobility, green infrastructures, urban regeneration, quality of public space and facilities) to policies aimed at increasing competitiveness in the urban regions (such as innovation, culture and creativity). Furthermore, to represent the ingredients of the long-term vision of metropolitan development, these topics often form part of very complex planning agenda, with implementation responsibilities distributed amongst a significant number of stakeholders. For example, the action plan for Bologna’s first approved metropolitan strategic plan was developed with 26 working groups and contained 67 strategic projects, grouped into 15 operational programmes.

The entry into force of the Delrio Reform introduced significant change in the form and rationale of these planning processes for three main reasons. Firstly, the law contains a requirement to renew strategic plans every three years and update them annually, with new actions plans more explicitly aligned to the metropolitan authority governance structure (i.e. competencies, budget, etc.). Secondly, from a spatial point of view, strategic plans no longer reflect voluntary-based cooperation within the urban region but instead must be referred to the territory defined by the institutional boundaries of the metropolitan area (i.e. the former province, the homogeneous zones). Thirdly, as the plans are shaped by the mandatory competencies performed by the Metropolitan City, related governance structures are expected to be more hierarchical and less flexible than previously.

Given that several metropolitan authorities are still experiencing difficulties with strategic planning, it is not easy to draw overall indications from the ongoing planning processes. Nevertheless, some elements have been explored in recent literature. For instance, Donati (2016) highlights that initial strategic planning emphasised the ‘process’ (a participatory method to gather the requirements of various local actors and stakeholders), while the reform attributes more importance to the ‘plan’ as the outcome of the planning process, which represents an ‘act of government’ aimed at providing direction to metropolitan government. However, the dual character of strategic planning (as ‘process’ and ‘planning outcome’) is not adequately addressed by several metropolitan authority statutes, with the consequence that strategic plans being developed seem to reflect a confusing mix of top-down (hierarchical) and bottom-up (participatory) approaches.

Another important reform implication for metropolitan strategic planning relates to its spatial dimension. As pointed out in other analyses, the functional urban areas (Crivello and Staricco, 2017) or the ‘de facto’ areas of cities as defined by Calafati (2016) often differ substantially from the territory encompassed by the boundaries of a Metropolitan City. This explains why previous strategic planning exercises (e.g. Turin and Bologna) were promoted by narrower and more cohesive institutional coalitions. It also highlights the need for future ‘official’ strategic plans to go beyond a rigid approach in the consideration of spatial morphologies of metropolitan areas and also address their complex morphologies, especially at the margins of the urban cores.

3.3 Addressing the European urban agenda at the metropolitan level

During the debate surrounding the EU's 2014–2020 programming cycle, the metropolitan dimension received more attention than previously. A 2011 European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) document, entitled 'Metropolitan Areas and City Regions in Europe 2020', highlighted the challenges tackling metropolitan government in Europe, given fragmented governance and the different approaches adopted. It advocated paying greater attention to metropolitan development within structural funds and in the future European urban agenda. As later recognised by the Pact of Amsterdam (2016), metropolitan governments were identified among the public authorities responsible for the implementation of integrated territorial investments (ITI) in the field of sustainable urban development (SUD). Consequently, as provided by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) regulation issued in 2013 (1301/2013), they could acquire the status of 'urban authorities' with increased responsibilities in the planning processes in relation to the ITIs (Atkinson, 2015; Tosics, 2017).

For the above reasons, creating alignment between the European urban agenda and the metropolitan dimension has been an Italian government priority. In preparation for the national strategy for the 2014–2020 EU funding period, a Ministry for Territorial Cohesion document (MCT, 2012) indicated the need to promote an overall strategy for urban areas, and in particular to: (a) address the functional areas beyond the administrative boundaries of local authorities; (b) recognise a clearer distinction in planning between small, medium and large cities/metropolitan areas; and (c) promote cooperation between various levels of government in decision-making about city development. Such guidance on the relevance of the metropolitan dimension in cohesion policy can be considered an interesting example of the Europeanisation of the domestic institutional reorganisation debate.

Given these assumptions, the national government launched a programme exclusively dedicated to the 14 Metropolitan Cities: the Programma Operativo Nazionale 'Città Metropolitane' (PON Metro). Approved by the European Commission on July 2015, the programme invests around €892 million (two-thirds from the ERDF and the European Social Fund) to promote innovative policy approach (digital agenda, energy, sustainable mobility, social inclusion, etc.) not yet explored at a metropolitan level. The overall goal is to improve the efficiency and sustainability of metropolitan services by promoting a smart city approach while also addressing social exclusion through a mix of interventions (social housing and community facilities) with a particular focus on the most deprived neighbourhoods.

Local action plans were co-produced by the national government and metropolitan authorities over a two-year period, focusing on three of the Europe 2020 strategy's eleven thematic objectives (TOs): enhancing access to, and use and quality of information and communication technologies (TO 2); supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors (TO 4); and promoting social inclusion, combating poverty

and any discriminations (TO 9). The PON Metro action plans seek to address several recognised metropolitan challenges and address these general objectives in the following ways:

- promoting a metropolitan digital agenda, to implement ICT solutions and increase digital interaction between city users and public administration, with the aim of achieving 70% of municipalities in Metropolitan Cities providing fully operative digital services
- increasing urban sustainability, through energy-saving interventions (e.g. lighting and public buildings) and improving sustainable mobility (e.g. bicycle lanes, ICT, green public transport solutions and shared mobility)
- reducing social exclusion, by increasing public housing stock, and providing new community facilities and services targeted at the most vulnerable population.

The programme is expected to achieve ambitious goals, for example reducing energy consumption for lighting in urban areas by 8.8%, increasing public transport passengers by 5% and bicycle use by 10%, building 2,270 new social houses and renovating around 35,000m² of abandoned buildings to support social activities and start-ups in the most marginalised neighbourhoods. As local action plans are currently still being implemented, there is obviously a lack of in-depth analysis as to the programme's actual effectiveness. However, some issues have already been identified, regarding in particular the programme's design and implementation.

Recognising that the programme is the first and only national attempt to date to promote an urban agenda at the metropolitan level, it is not easy to identify a clear model of metropolitan governance that it aims to promote. For instance, it has been argued (Urban@it, 2016) that while the co-production of the local action plans is novel within Italian multi-level government relations, by choosing to provide a single planning framework for the whole country, this may have simplified the design process and, in turn, resulted in quite standardised local action plans.

Other critical concerns must also be highlighted regarding the dominant role of capital cities in the PON Metro planning process. Firstly, to speed up implementation, the national government and the European Commission agreed to concentrate the programme's most impactful and costly investments on the capital cities of metropolitan authorities (e.g. transport infrastructure and social housing). Secondly, given the uncertainty stemming from the slow progress implementing metropolitan reform, capital cities were asked to adopt the role of 'urban authority' to lead local action plan implementation, instead of the still-weak metropolitan authorities. These approaches may in some ways exacerbate imbalances and political conflict between the metropolitan core and the periphery, and undermine the kind of metropolitan governance that the PON Metro was seeking to promote.

4. Conclusion: the question of dealing with territorial diversity

The creation of a metropolitan level of government in Italy is the result of a troubled history, covering the last 25 years, approximately. The main stages in this process were, first, the largely unrealised institutional reform passed in 1990; second, the recognition of metropolitan areas as levels of government in the Italian constitution (2001); and, finally, the reform that is currently being implemented based on Law 56/2014 (also known as the Delrio Reform). While the question of how to govern large urban areas through metropolitan authorities has often been addressed within political and academic discourses, this has only produced extremely limited outcomes in terms of tangible institutional reorganisation and policy-making.

By contrast, over the past few years we have seen the emergence of new processes that differ in nature. Despite contradictions and a problematic political context, these processes provide new starting points for examining metropolitan government in the country. On the one hand, there are institutional reorganisation processes, based on the legal effects of the reform approved in 2014. On the other hand, some attempts to innovate the planning practice are taking place, prompted by national initiatives explicitly addressing the metropolitan dimension (PON Metro), or in response to new competencies given to metropolitan authorities in relation to strategic planning. As a result of these processes, metropolitan areas have undoubtedly attracted unprecedented political attention in recent Italian history.

However, evaluation of recent developments remains provisional as several key challenges still need to be addressed. These can be summarised into three main areas. Firstly, the institutional reorganisation process underway is largely incomplete (Mobilio, 2017; Vandelli, 2014; Vandelli and Morisi, 2017), given the different regional/local approaches to implementing reform and the confusing situation resulting from the 2016 referendum. Secondly, progress made towards metropolitan government still has not led to a clear metropolitan political agenda, as urban problems are still weakly addressed by the national government (Allulli and Tortorella, 2013; d'Albergo, 2010; Urban@it, 2017). Thirdly, the future metropolitan governance hierarchy and institutional relationships remain unclear, while Metropolitan City boundaries also do not always reflect territorial relationships in urban regions (Calafati and Veneri, 2013; Calafati, 2016), especially in the case of large and polycentric functional urban areas (e.g. Milan and Naples urban regions).

The current situation can be interpreted as the result of the choice of national government to provide a standardised solution for metropolitan government (Crivello and Staricco, 2017). Indeed, metropolitan morphological complexity was constrained by the boundaries of an existing institution – the province – with serious governance and planning implications where such boundaries did not adequately address the dynamics of metropolitan development. As a result, despite efforts to address diversity within the metropolitan statutes (Mobilio, 2017; Vandelli and Morisi, 2017), a generic model for territorialisation of metropolitan

government is currently being promoted for the whole country: a one-size-fits-all approach.

Given the importance of the issue for the future of metropolitan government, based on the position adopted in this paper, we think metropolitan governance reform proposals need to be refined. There is considerable evidence showing a fair level of variation in spatial and economic development in larger urban areas in Italy. This diversity needs to be acknowledged both locally and nationally, in other words both in terms of differences within particular metropolitan areas and between metropolitan areas.

Indeed, Italian urban regions have experienced very different socio-economic development and spatial transformation across the country (Balducci et al., 2017). Demographic change varies diametrically (Cittalia, 2014): while overall growth is limited to just a few cases (Bologna, Rome and Catania), most metropolitan areas are experiencing an inner city demographic decline and population growth in surrounding municipalities. Social change is also evolving very differently, with the proportion of foreigners in metropolitan areas ranging from 2–4% in southern regions and greater than 10% in the cases of Milan, Bologna and Florence.

A national perspective is particularly important, as one of the reform objectives is to enhance the role of large urban areas in regional development. This stems from a long and wider debate regarding city and regional development in Europe (Atkinson, 2015), which in Italy comes up against deep rooted development divergences that exist between northern and southern regions.

While the entire Italian urban system is generally considered poor in terms of global competitiveness analyses (Brookings Institute, 2014; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2013; UN-Habitat, 2016), the country's deep-rooted north-south development gap is widely addressed in the literature and reflected in a large number of social indicators – income, employment, productivity, institutional capacity and quality of life. This is not only a regional question (Eurostat, 2016a; Svimez, 2015) as large inequalities also exist at a metropolitan level across the country (Cittalia, 2014; Eurostat, 2016b). It has also been pointed out (Svimez, 2015) that the recent economic crisis seems to have exacerbated such developmental differences, despite considerable financial support provided by the EU's cohesion policy to less developed regions, which include six out of the fourteen Metropolitan Cities³.

We argue that these different development trajectories form another obstacle to full, nationwide, implementation of the Delrio Reform. Firstly, a highly differentiated regional system might undermine the national government's preferred centralised approach, as reflected in reform proposals. Secondly, especially in southern Italy where regional authorities retain huge power in the management of the EU's structural funds, it can be argued that Metropolitan Cities will not be able to significantly reduce their dependency on their regions, a level of government that often had conflicting relations with larger cities.

Endnotes

- ¹ The nine metropolitan areas identified by national Law 142/90 were: Turin, Milan, Venice, Bologna, Genoa, Florence, Rome, Naples and Bari. The metropolitan areas in the regions with special statute were: Palermo (Sicily), Catania (Sicily), Messina (Sicily) and Cagliari (Sardinia).
- ² The only exception is given by the Metropolitan City of Cagliari, which is composed of only 17 municipalities from the previous province as a result of a law passed by the Sardinia region in 2016.
- ³ The Metropolitan Cities in the EU's less developed regions are: Naples (Campania region); Bari (Apulia region); Reggio Calabria (Calabria region); and Palermo, Catania and Messina (Sicily region).

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