

# **Institutional rescaling, urban policy and planning innovation in Italy: is city-region the answer?**

Track 7

## **Planning the present: Finding space for regulating future changes**

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### **Abstract**

A consequence of the crisis for several European countries is the return of cities and urban policy within the national agenda. It is not a uniform process, since the emergence of political priorities related to the urban areas may be influenced by several domestic factors, including the legal framework, institutional organisation, approaches to planning and other issues for policy-making. An interesting perspective to observe these processes is to analyzing the question of metropolitan areas and city-regions which, despite the difficulties, all over Europe are increasingly seen as a crucial government scale to cope with some old (decentralisation, economic competitiveness, social cohesion) and new challenges (resilience, climate change) for regional development.

Italy is a well representative case of this trend for the convergence of two processes that have recently refocused on urban regions new political expectations after decades of failed attempts and inertia. The first is an institutional reform, approved in 2014, that have established fourteen metropolitan cities (MCs) across the national territory that will gather relevant planning competencies over a broad range of sectors. The other process, closely interconnected with the previous, is the decision of the government to target to the emerging metropolitan cities a series of planning initiatives, including a national programme under the 2014-2020 structural funds (PON Metro). With these processes on the background, the paper aims to discuss the evolution of the urban question in Italy, between institutional reorganisation, post-crisis strategies and emerging demands from the local level.

After an introduction devoted to explore the debate on urban-city-regions in Europe, the work is structured into three main sections. A first section provides a review of the recent Italian debate around the question of cities' development and the problematic implementation of an urban policy at national level. A particular attention will be paid to the role of major cities within the country's pattern of development, whose institutional role have been often debated as a source of conflict for regional development. In a second section, after introducing the role and competencies of metropolitan cities, the new urban geography provided by the reform is put into question under the light of the deep territorial diversity that characterizes city-regions in the country. In a third section, some recent attempts of policy innovation at the metropolitan level – top-down initiatives like the PON Metro, as well as strategic plans among the bottom-up initiatives – are presented in order to underline their role in the shift of priorities and methodologies around the urban issues. In the conclusion, the risks and opportunities deriving from these different innovation processes are discussed in the perspective of the future of metropolitan government.

**Keywords:** Italy, urban policy, metropolitan areas, planning and governance

## 1. Introduction

Europe is the most urbanized continent in the world. Since the industrial revolution has overturned the balance between cities and countryside, urban economies and social life are the quintessence of Europe's model of development. Although an emphasis has been historically placed on the polycentric character of the European territory, greatest cities have always exerted a prominent role in the European urban imaginary, as witnessed by the pioneering work of sociology founders like George Simmel and Max Weber.

Although capitals such as Wien and Berlin, London and Paris, had reached already in the XIX century the demographic size and functional structure of what we consider nowadays a metropolitan area, it is only in the second post-war (and in the sixties particularly) that metropolisation started to be perceived as a political question in a broad range of European countries. After the creation of the first "communauté urbaine" in France in 1966 (Lille, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, Lyon, and Nantes) planning and institutional experiments have involved countries with federal or regional structure, like Germany, Spain and Italy, as well as more centralised states like the UK and Portugal. The main argument in favour of these early experiments was the decentralisation of the State, with city-regions seen as an instrument to increase efficiency in public policy and give political response to local-regional mobilization.

The emergence of globalisation and of supranational powers (like the EU in Europe) along the 90s (Le Galès, 2002; Savitch and Kantor, 2002) brought back the attention towards city-regions but under a very different light respect to the previous debate. At the end of the 90s, in his well known paper on "territorial rescaling" in Europe, Neil Brenner argued that "whereas debates on metropolitan institutions during the 1960s and 1970s focused predominantly on the issues of administrative efficiency and local service provision, contemporary discussions of regional governance increasingly emphasise the need for administrative flexibility, regionally co-ordinated economic development strategies and the problem of intensified global interspatial competition" (Brenner, 1999, p. 445).

These factors, together with the spatial rearticulation of urban regions related to processes such as urban sprawl, economic restructuring, and demographic shrinkage (Couch et al., 2008; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012), has led to the emergence of polycentric regions across the European territory (Hall and Pain, 2006). Comparative studies carried out on the functional pattern of hundreds of European urban areas (Espon, 2005; Espon, 2007)<sup>1</sup> have demonstrated that metropolisation and polycentric development are processes taking place within a wide range of territorial situations. In fact, while a greater number of metropolitan areas are still within a long-standing phase of suburbanisation (demographic shift from the core to the periphery), there are urban regions characterized by relevant growth trends both at the core and the periphery of the agglomeration and others, on the opposite side, affected by demographic decline at all levels (Espon, 2007).

Defining European urban regions, also, is a question that cannot be separated by the size and functional profile of each agglomeration. On the one side, megalopolis such as Paris and London, for their role as hubs of world class advanced services, have a range of spatial influences that can reach an interregional or even transnational dimension (Neuman and Hull, 2011; Herschell, 2014). On the other, the European territory is also characterized of a dense network of smaller metropolitan areas which are very differentiated in terms of development patterns and regional interconnections (Hall and Payn, 2006). In this regard, Tosics (2007) argued that European urban areas, wherever they are located, are the expression of two separate types of challenges:

- external challenges, mainly imposed by globalisation and the need to achieve – through intermunicipal coordination – greater critical mass in terms of agglomeration, economies of scale, industrial specialisation, capacity of technological and social innovation;
- internal challenges, related to the need for controlling the negative spillovers of the metropolitan dimension, through the containment of urban sprawl and a more effective coordination of functions of vital importance for citizens' quality of life, like transport, welfare, environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Besides the two mentioned, other Espon studies dealing with the metropolitan question are *Metroborder* (2010), on cross-border polycentric metropolitan regions; *Polyce* (2012) on metropolisation and polycentric development in Central Europe; *Best Metropolises*, on the development of the metropolitan areas of Paris, Berlin and Warsaw. The Urbact *Metrogov* project, also, deals with the administrative set-ups and territorial policies within eight European metropolitan areas.

The distinctive character of contemporary metropolitan morphologies, therefore, is the fluidity of their territorial extension. While urban regions spread population and functions according to a variety of economic and environmental dynamics their influence can range significantly within their regional context (Espou, 2007). The extent of these spatial interconnections from the core to the borders of urban regions poses the challenging question on how to treat their limits in terms of institutional boundaries. It is a question that, from a country to another, is determined by the legal frameworks within which urban regions are immersed and, in turn, by the different planning culture of which planning policy is expression. As demonstrated by many scholars (Davies et al., 1989; Newmann and Thornley, 1996; EC, 1997; Balchin et al., 1999; Adams et al., 2006), Europe offers a wide diversity in this respect.

Together with globalisation, the rise of the European Union as an actor able to influence the making of regional policy and its related governance structures (Brenner, 2004; Hooge, 1996; Marks et al., 1996) has led to a renovated approach to the interpretation of metropolitan areas (Albrechts et al., 2001; Gualini, 2006; Herrschel and Newman, 2003; Salet and Gualini, 2006). In the last two decades, particularly, a growing emphasis has been placed on the 'strategic functions' that can be performed by the city-regions – viewed as specific governmental instruments of urban regions – beside the 'regulative functions' for which they were initially conceived as planning actors in different countries (Albrechts et al., 2003; Healey et al., 1997; Healey, 2007; Oosterlynck et al., 2010; Salet et al., 2003). The formation of specific strategic functions within city-regions – despite the different meanings given to the concept in the literature and policy-making (Rodríguez-Pose, 2008) – responds to the need of addressing some of the inertia that made ineffective the metropolitan level of government across Europe. In many experiences, strategic planning has been interpreted as an instrument to help city-regions to construct on a voluntaristic base the legitimacy to perform some of the most conflicting planning functions at the metropolitan scale (land-use regulation, waste management, infrastructural development) (Tosics, 2007). In other cases, the formation of development strategies as an expression of enlarged territories (like polycentric urban regions), is an instrument to better support city-regions to play a proactive role in the context of increased international competition (Begg, 2002; Parkinson, 2004; Scott, 2001). In both cases, however, strategic planning can be conceptualised not merely as the production of strategies related to the formal competencies of city-regions governments, but rather as a process of governance innovation in the way of treating a wide range of policy questions of spatial relevance at the metropolitan scale (Albrechts, 2004; Healey, 2007).

Respect to the general backdrop outlined in this paragraph, this article seeks to describe the process leading to the creation of metropolitan government in Italy and to critically discuss its consequence on urban policy. In fact, after several attempts, a recent reform approved in 2014 provides for new bases for local government through the creation of 14 new metropolitan authorities with increased planning powers on wide range of policy sectors. After this introduction, a second section of the paper is devoted to review the recent debate around the urban question and the problem of policy-making at the metropolitan scale. It will be discussed, particularly, the controversial role of the major cities within the country's pattern of development, frequently underestimated in the debate respect to other territorial morphologies. The third section reflects on the difficult conceptualization of the metropolitan issue in Italy, due to the marked differences that characterize the metropolitan areas in terms of demographic size, spatial dimension, economic profile, and institutional capacities.

The next paragraph presents two kinds of policies performed by different territorial actors to address metropolitan development: (a) the PON Metro (acronym for National Operative Programme "Città Metropolitane"), launched by the national government in order to support the 14 metropolitan authorities in the development of experimental policies in the fields of environment, technological innovation and social inclusion and (b) the experiences developed by a number of metropolitan coalitions in terms of strategic planning before the reform implementation. In the conclusion, the risks and opportunities deriving from these different innovation processes are discussed in the perspective of the future of metropolitan government.

## **2. Urban question vs metropolitan question in the national agenda: a debate**

Despite around 80% of population live within urban areas and the Italian cities are historically the spatial structure of the country's social and economic organisation, the city and urban policy have taken a recognizable place only at the turn of the eighties. From the early nineties onward, instead, the

urban dimension appears more explicitly within a flow of different types of initiatives that can be broadly summarized as follows:

- legislative reforms, directed to providing for larger powers to local government;
- organisational arrangements, aimed at creating within the national government new structures and competencies on urban issues;
- national programmes devoted to the cities in the mainstream of the EU's approach to urban areas.

Within the first types of initiatives, a milestone can be considered the reform of local government issued in 1990 (Law N. 142), which provided the first (but unrealized) attempt to creating a metropolitan level of government, as well as the legal basis for the growing managerialization of local government. A few years later, a reform passed in 1993 (Law N. 81) resulted in an increased political stability of city's government through the direct election of mayors and the provision to them of larger powers upon the city councils. The focus on urban areas at the turn of the nineties led also to the creation of new forms of governmental organisation, including a ministry for urban areas (1987) – whose competencies were passed later to different departments under the control of the Prime Minister – and a permanent “State-Cities and Local Authorities Conference” (1996) that is still called to discuss all the government measures affecting urban areas and local development. According to many others, the most important factor affecting the urban question in Italy lies in the spreading of national programmes dedicated to cities and neighborhoods in accordance with the integrated approach promoted at the European level. In fact, through the help of national initiatives like the Urban Renewal Programmes (PRU) and the Neighborhood Contracts (CdQ) hundreds of cities have experienced the first effort towards urban regeneration by overcoming the traditional approaches.

Despite the density of legislative, organizational and planning initiatives spread over more than two decades, however, this process can hardly be considered as a deliberate and coherent political orientation in support of a national urban policy. In the recent Italian debate, instead, several analysis (Calafati, 2009, 2014; Cittalia, 2013; Dematteis, 2011; Urban@it, 2016) have emphasized the lacking of a national policy for the cities, with a series of negative consequences (environmental, social and economic) for the present state of the country.

Starting from the interpretation provided by Van den Berg (1998; 2007), and later developed by d'Albergo (2010), Allulli and Tortorella (2013) describe the efforts to address urban issues by the Italian government as a combination of “explicit” and “implicit” national policies with various “direct” and “indirect” effects on the urban question. According to the authors, these efforts had a limited impact on the urban question and cannot be described as a coordinated policy for the reason that «(i) they do not work together to define a homogeneous and coherent policy, due to the high degree of fragmentation among them, and (ii) they are driven by a process of incremental adaptation to imperatives and dominant paradigms in urban policy at European level» (p. 13). The authors identify the main obstacle «on the one hand 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» (p. 13). The strong role attributed to regions over the last four decades (see also Vinci, 2014), therefore, has resulted in an increasing tension between instances of decentralization and the stability of local institutional arrangements, with the consequence of creating fragmentation of responsibilities in the urban policy subsystem and, in turn, conflicts that have prevented the emergence of a real urban agenda as in many other countries (Allulli and Tortorella, 2013).

Fragmentation in the institutional system is one of the main argument in the analysis of Calafati and Veneri (2010; 2013), who argue that the intense processes of spatial polarisation that have taken place since the 1950s in Italy have not been accompanied by corresponding 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). According to the authors, this discrepancy has prevented to unlock the development potential embedded within the Italian urban system (very dense and polycentric by nature), with the result of providing serious implications on what can be described as the contemporary urban question.

The lack of territorial integration in contrast with the apparently richness of the urban system, however, may not be attributed exclusively to the fragmentation of the institutional organisation at the

local level. On the contrary, in the last two decades the Italian regions have been the scene of hundreds of planning experiments based on coalitions formed by neighboring municipalities. A set of national initiatives under the strand of the “New programming” (Gualini, 2001), as well as other local development initiatives in the context of the Europeanization of the regional policy (Governa and Salone, 2004), have been perceived for years by the Italian policy-makers as the laboratories upon which constructing new conceptions of local and polycentric development.

In spite of these efforts, the impact of this experimental phase on institutional reorganization can be considered very limited. What it seems to have prevented these experiences to becoming an instrument for decentralization is a series of factors of different nature. According to Governa and Salone (2005), these territorial re-composition processes seem to refer «more to innovations in local practices than to territorial policies at national level or to a general change in the planning system» (p. 267). From an economic perspective, Calafati (2009) argued that the problem lies in a mistaken conceptualization of territorial integration, with the effect that the processes of “coalescence” that so far have taken place in many regions under the form of “local production systems” has not been accompanied by policies aimed at completing the process of integration in institutional terms. As stressed by Perulli (2013), also, the State response to the economic crisis in recent years has ended up strengthening the mistrust towards the local in the national economic policy, resulting in further closure towards a perspective of complete decentralisation of development policy. Therefore, despite the rhetoric on the role of cities for country’s development, and the attempts towards a federal reconfiguration of the public finance (Cammelli, 2011), municipalities have not found in the national government a supporter able (or intent on) to devolve them real institutional powers.

Within this ambivalent process, a special critical attention must be given to the question of greatest cities and urban regions. In the last few years, the debate around the creation of the city-regions has brought a new tension towards the argument, as well as to considerable amounts of analysis from different perspectives. Many of these works (Cittalia, 2013; Dematteis, 2011; Urban@it, 2016; Vitali, 2014) agree on the existence of an apparent paradox of the great Italian cities which, on the one hand, constitute the place of living for around a third of country’s population, concentrating the main economic processes and, on the other, are characterised by the emergence of different conflicts and policy inertia. A shared opinion, therefore, is that the urban question for a too long time has not been adequately focused within a national agenda and the lack of attention towards the (major) cities is one of the reason of the country’s socio-economic decline.

Dematteis (2011) argues that the claim for an urban agenda in Italy is legitimized by the risk that ungoverned urban regions are not able to tackle the negative effects of the processes of disarticulation that typically take place within the larger urban systems:

- a vertical disarticulation, provided by those economic actors (as multinationals, transport operators or other global players) that tend to pursue their own sectoral strategies with no (or limited) consideration of local interests;
- an horizontal disarticulation, given by the development policies carried out by the different municipalities, sometimes in contrast with the general interest of the urban system to which they belong.

The lack of policy coordination at the scale of urban regions makes local government with less power of control over these processes, with the consequence of have replaced their traditional role of “regulator” (of development) with a role of simple “mediator” between global and local interests (Dematteis, 2011). In such a state of under-governed urban regions, in fact, the stronger players have generally the freedom to pursue the most advantageous location choices, with the risk of providing serious implications over a wide range of territorial issues such as soil consumption, housing costs, and accessibility to public services.

The contrast between local interests and global processes in the Italian cities has been addressed by other scholars in the recent years such as Bellicini (2011). He highlights the limited role of demographic change in explaining the real estate boom that has taken place in several regions along the 2000s, underlining its linkage, instead, with the financial speculation that have kept investments on property development as profitable as never before in the recent Italian history. Other analyses have demonstrated that growth in the housing provision presents very weak correlation with the social rearticulation of the Italian urban regions: the rise of immigration in several urban areas (Caponio, 2011), for instance, have not found adequate responses in the social housing policy, while a growing

number of families (the so-called “grey zone”) is forced to face the housing market with no public support (Baldini and Poggio, 2014; Cdp, 2014; Cecodhas, 2012; Nomisma, 2010) resulting in the growth of urban (relative) poverty and in a social rearticulation of the metropolitan areas.

Other contributions have posed the question of the environmental consequences of non-governed urban development. According to Lanzani (2014), in large part of the country a contemporary metropolitan question cannot be separated by the powerful urbanisation process that has taken place as a result of a laissez-faire approach to spatial development. Decades of uncontrolled sprawl within the urban fringes, in fact, has resulted in a new form of metropolis characterized by unlimited spatial boundaries, with serious consequences ranging from the economic to the ecological domains. All these processes, as argued by Secchi (2010), – makes the Italian territory very near to collapse, requiring the adoption of an urgent urban agenda to be based on new policy principles, such as stopping the soil consumption, the reactivation of the ecological cycles, the re-use of the abandoned or underused physical capital spread over the territories.

Looking at these dynamics as a whole, other works have argued that several Italian urban regions are undergoing a process of post-metropolitanisation. In a recent report (Urban@it, 2016, p. 52) it is claimed that the metropolitan process is linked to an «implosion-explosion of the relationship between the administrative boundaries and the geographies deriving from the social, economic, environmental and political processes». In this context, the activism of (public and private) individual actors has led to the emergence of a kind of “decentralized” geography of power which, taking advantage from the absence of planning and regulation, has ended up to increasing the conflicts for space and territorial fragmentation.

### **3. The diversity of Italian metropolitan areas**

Against this backdrop, the reform for the creation of the city-region level of government has been obviously loaded of considerable expectations. It is the result of an uneven legislative process started in the midst of the crisis (2011), after the failures of the previous attempts made in 1990 and 2001 (Cammelli, 2011; Tortorella and Allulli, 2014; Vandelli and Vitali, 2014).

The Metropolitan cities (MCs) are established by the law N. 56 of 2014 (also known as Delrio reform) according to three main principles:

- the MC area is set up starting from the territories of the former provinces;
- the MC government is led by a metropolitan mayor which coincides with the mayor of the main city;
- the decisional process is supported by a metropolitan council and a metropolitan conference which are composed, respectively, by a selection of representatives (elected among mayors and city councilors) and by all the mayors of the municipalities constituting the city-region.

The main governing functions devolved to the MCs covers a range of policies resulting from the merging of regional, provincial and municipal competencies. They include, particularly:

- strategic planning and spatial planning;
- transport and mobility;
- provision of local services of metropolitan relevance;
- regulation of local services in the fields of health, education and welfare;
- promotion and coordination of development policy.

A special role for the setting of these competencies in relation to the spatial and functional organization of the metropolitan area is assigned to the metropolitan statute, a kind of “constitution” (Dematteis, 2011) that every MC has issued (or in some cases is still preparing) in the current implementation step of the reform. For the flexibility they can introduce in the organisation of each MC, the statutes are expected to ensure a deeper process of territorialisation of the reform, by shaping the governing tools and democratic processes to the diversity of the local contexts. For instance, some statutes (Milan, Rome, Naples) have opted for the direct election of the metropolitan mayor, while others have introduced alternative governance systems in order to ensure a more effective consideration of the territorial characters. On this point, it has been argued (Urban@it, 2016), that the statutes already adopted display the emergence of two different styles of metropolitan government: on the one side, a soft interpretation of the MCs’ powers, mostly based on priorities such as cooperation

and subsidiarity and, on the other, an idea of stronger government based on a more explicit verticalisation of the decisional processes.

This reality stems, as expected, from the significant heterogeneity that characterizes the metropolitan areas as considered by the Derlio reform: fourteen city-regions, ten of which (Turin, Milan, Venice, Genoa, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Bari, Naples, Reggio Calabria) located in the continental part of the country and four within the autonomous regions of Sicily (Palermo, Catania, Messina) and Sardinia (Cagliari).

Metropolitan Cities	Population (Dec.2014)	Surface (Sqm)	Density (In./Sqm)	Number of municipalities	Population Capital City
Rome	4,342,046	5,352	811	121	2,872,021
Milan	3,196,825	1,575	2,030	134	1,337,155
Naples	3,118,149	1,171	2,663	92	978,399
Turin	2,291,719	6,829	336	316	896,773
Palermo	1,276,525	5,009	255	82	678,492
Bari	1,266,379	3,821	331	41	327,361
Catania	1,116,168	3,574	312	58	315,601
Florence	1,012,180	3,514	288	42	381,037
Bologna	1,004,323	3,702	271	56	386,181
Genoa	862,175	1,839	469	67	592,507
Venice	858,198	2,462	349	44	264,579
Messina	647,477	3,266	198	108	240,414
Reggio Calabria	557,993	3,183	175	97	183,974
Cagliari	431,302	1,248	345	17	154,478

Table 1. Data describing the Italian metropolitan cities

In fact, whereas these areas represent more than one third of the country's population and constitute the core of the national urban system, they also are the place of prominent spatial and development differences. These differences are described below by assuming a few interpretations keys.

### *Size*

The population of the Italian city-regions ranges from more than 4 millions of inhabitants (Rome) to less than half a million (Cagliari). It is important to note, also, that the capital city tends to polarize a very different share of the MC's total population, from more than two thirds in the case of Rome and Genoa, to around one third in the cases of Naples and Florence. In spite of current perimeters, furthermore, it has been argued that the metropolitan areas "de facto" (Calafati and Veneri, 2013) – in some cases as Milan and Naples – are significantly larger than the metropolitan areas "de jure" as a result of the influence exercised by the capital towards the region as a whole. The choice to take the former provinces' perimeters as the base for the creation of the metropolitan area implies further divergences in the spatiality of city-regions. For instance, the extent of the Florence metropolitan area is much smaller than the functional perimeter of the capital city. On the contrary, metropolitan areas such as Bari and Palermo have a territorial extension that is oversized respect to the metropolitan core, till the case limit of Turin which embraces thousands of very small and internal municipalities, part of them within mountain areas.

### *Territorial heterogeneity*

The above described discrepancies implies further differences in the relation that any metropolitan core establishes with its regional context over time. City-regions as Milan and Naples appear as very dense urban systems with intense interconnections at a regional or even interregional dimension. Milan, particularly, is the core of an urban-region of European relevance, whose role is dominant to an extent that cannot be limited to its own institutional region. The relation between the built and the natural environment, furthermore, establish a variety of spatial morphologies, which can explain the

original configurations that many MCs are providing within their organisational statutes. The natural limits, as in the case of Genoa and Palermo, have determined the formation of a kind of linear metropolis, with simpler urban networking but also with greater pressure on the remaining vacant land. In other cases (Milan, Naples, Florence), the capital cities are the hubs of polycentric urban networks with intense soil consumption processes spread all over the urban-region (Cittalia, 2013). In this respect, some recent analysis (Istat, 2015; Ispra, 2015) have shown the weak correlation between urban sprawl and demographic change, highlighting the process of post-metropolisation taking place in several urban-regions.



Image 1. The location of Metropolitan cities on the national territory

*Social structure*



While almost all the Italian metropolitan areas have faced processes of suburbanisation like in other European countries, the extent and character of these processes have resulted in strong internal differentiation. A relevant point stands in the growth unbalance between the core cities and the surrounding municipalities. According to the last census (Cittalia, 2014), only a limited number of MCs (Bologna, Catania and especially Rome) in the last decade show a demographic growth both in the core city and the metropolitan area. A few cities, like Cagliari and Venezia, seem not have stopped the suburbanisation process (decline in the core, growth in the periphery), while others (primarily Genoa) are still in the midst of a lasting process of population loss at all spatial scales. It is clear from data as foreign population has had a significant impact on these processes, since the metropolitan area of Milan, Bologna, Florence and Rome have all a share of foreign residents over the 10%, a percentage that rises significantly within the core cities. Furthermore, as shown recently (Cittalia, 2013), the social structure of the MCs is highly affected by the types and relevance of the urban functions hosted by the core cities, with a growing amount of city-users (students, professionals) that, in turn, tend to impact on commuting and mobility within the whole metropolitan area (as in the cases of Milan, Bologna, Venezia).

#### *Economic power*

The Italian cities usually do not appear among the top-ranked metropolitan areas within the analysis on urban global competitiveness. According to a recent report from the Brookings Institution (2014), they all stand in the last thirty positions of a list of three hundred cities monitored through an index taking into account growth in productivity and employment. Other indexes based on more structured set of indicators (Kearney, 2015; The Economist, 2013; UN-Habitat, 2012) usually place cities as Rome and Milan at higher positions but far below a significant number of European cities. Despite these rankings do not render the complexity of economic agglomeration within the domestic pattern of development, they certainly support the arguments of many scholars (as Calafati) that underline the weak contribution of greater Italian cities to the national economic development. Furthermore, any consideration on the economic performances of the Italian urban regions needs to be observed under the light of the long-lasting development gap between Northern and Southern regions. The level of incomes within the Southern metropolitan areas, in fact, is on average two thirds of the richest urban areas in the Northern regions (Cittalia, 2014), and many other indicators show a very different impact of the crisis on the urban economies across the country (Svimez, 2015).

#### *Institutional capacity*

The North-South divide is even more marked if looking at the performances of local government in some key sectors for local development. Recent surveys carried out in the preparation of the PON metro show clear differences among the MCs in the performance of sectors such as public transport, environment policy, social housing. The Southern cities are generally far below the national average in the number of carried passengers by the public transport but, as a result of the vicious circle this fact determines, they show an opposite trend in the (private) motorisation growth rate. The transition towards more sustainable ways of transport, through investments on cycling lanes or car-sharing, still present much lower attention within urban government in the South. Environmental policy marks further divergences. According to Cittalia (2014), the share of recycled waste in the Southern MCs is on average between one third and a half of the Northern ones, with a worrying steady trend over the years. Housing policy, also, can provide further evidences of the different impact of the crisis on metropolitan areas. While public housing is spread across the country with no substantial geographical differences, the transition towards a social housing model seems to go at very different speed (Nomisma, 2010; CDP, 2014). Beside that, public housing provision is severely affected in many southern urban areas such as Naples, Palermo, Catania by the phenomenon of illegal occupations (Federcasa, 2015), with growing consequences on urban poverty and social deprivation.

#### **4. Metropolitan areas as places for policy innovation: top-down and bottom-up initiatives**

The rise of political interest toward the metropolitan dimension has not been limited to the governmental issues. The idea of supporting the implementation of the Delrio reform, in fact, has led institutional actors at different levels to shape on this new territorial dimension a range of policies and planning initiatives. While it is still unclear how the metropolitan cities will put into practice the new

competencies given them by the Delrio reform (spatial planning, for instance), some efforts have been made in the direction of increasing innovation in the policy-making and the related governance arrangements. These efforts stem from such a different rationales that cannot be described as parts of a unitary national strategy. Rather, they appear as far different interpretations on how metropolitan areas can function as the drivers for future urban development. It can be helpful to introduce them as top-down and bottom-up metropolitan policy, respectively.

- to the first type it belongs the already cited National Operational Programme “Metropolitan Cities” (PON Metro), led by the national Agency for the Territorial Cohesion;
- for the second type it should be mentioned the strategic planning initiatives started by a few metropolitan cities over the last decade.

The PON Metro is part of the national urban agenda and it will be funded within the framework of the 2014-2020 EU’s cohesion policy. It has been approved by the European Commission on July 2015 and it is expected to provide investments on the 14 metropolitan cities for around 892 millions of euro, two thirds of which through the ERDF and ESF. It has been emphasized by the national government as the first programme explicitly targeted to the metropolitan cities, with the aim of empowering local authorities of wide responsibilities in implementation.

The overall goal of the PON Metro is to improve the quality and efficiency of urban services, through a dissemination of the smart city approach, and to face social exclusion particularly in the most deprived urban neighborhoods. The structure of the action plan is common to the 14 MCs and it is based on three of the thematic objectives provided for the Europe 2020 strategy (TOs 2, 4 and 9). As a result, the local action plans – agreed after a process of co-planning with different national authorities – will cover the following areas:

- Digital agenda, by spreading and sharing new models of interactive services within the metropolitan area;
- Energy efficiency, through interventions on the public buildings and the technological networks;
- Sustainable transport, with a focus on ICT solutions and soft mobility;
- Social inclusion, through the creation of housing facilities and services for the most fragile population.

The expected impact of the action plans combined is quite ambitious: for instance, providing around 70% of the municipalities with integrated and interactive information systems, reducing energy consumption in the public sector of around 20 GWh every year, the provision of social housing solutions for around 1,800 beneficiaries, the regeneration of around 35,000 sqms of spaces to support social activities and start-ups in the marginalized communities.

The very early stage of the programme implementation does not allow to provide any reliable evaluation on its effectiveness. A few comments, instead, can be made on the type of policy innovation the programme is proposed to stimulate in terms of planning approach and strategic orientation. It has been argued (Urban@it, 2016), for instance, that the PON Metro is the first attempt to address an explicit development policy to the metropolitan scale. Beside that, the approach practiced to planning is also innovative, since it has brought together several national departments in the co-production of the action plans proposed by the metropolitan cities. In terms of planning strategies, the programme tries to integrate in an innovative way two apparently divergent development targets: the need to modernize the urban systems, through an extensive application of the smart city model and, on the other side, a quick response to the social crisis, by focusing on some well defined targets as deprived population and immigrants.

Some doubts, instead, can be raised about the expected impact of the programme on the strengthening of the governance mechanisms within the Metropolitan cities. During the planning process, for instance, the investments towards the municipalities outside the capital city have been strongly limited with the pretext to secure the action plans implementation. This fact has led to political tensions within the metropolitan coalitions, only partially eased by subsequent interventions by the national government. Furthermore, only a few cities provide an integrated metropolitan vision as a strategic framework for the PON Metro action plans. This fact, it has been observed (Urban@it, 2016), will make the metropolitan relevance of the programme highly dependent from the existence of strong governance relations within the different local contexts.

Strengthening local governance and planning capacities at the metropolitan scale were, instead, the objectives of what we called “bottom-up” metropolitan policy. In Turin, for instance, the birth of the metropolitan city led to a follow-up and reorientation of the strategic planning process started at the end of the nineties. The third strategic plan “Torino Metropoli 2025” is an update of the previous strategic plan of 2006, whose implementation has been weakened by the lack of a clear institutional framework. The vision adopted – a “city of opportunity” – is founded upon two key strategies: creating a metropolitan governance and enabling economic growth. The first strategy, particularly, is structured on different development policies – among the others integrated mobility, green infrastructures, regeneration of urban spaces – that is expected to enable the metropolitan government by following up the collaborative approach already practiced in the previous experience.

In Bologna, the “Piano Strategico Metropolitano 2.0” under preparation is a revision of the strategic plan adopted in 2013 before the institution of the metropolitan city. The first plan was the outcome of a voluntary-based cooperation between public and private organisations in the metropolitan area, with the aim of sharing a common vision of development. It has led to the identification of 15 strategic programme and 67 planning actions covering different sectors such as innovation, culture, social cohesion, environment, mobility. The new strategic plan, instead, is trying to integrate the previous vision of development under the light of the new territorial organisation adopted within the metropolitan statute required by the national reform. Also Milan has experienced a strategic planning process well in advance of the formal institution of the metropolitan city: in 2006, under the impulse of the former province, the strategic plan “Città di Città” (2006) was conceived as a strategic framework to increase the synergies between public and private initiatives in the urban region with the overall objective of improving its “habitability” (Balducci et al., 2011).

The legacy of these experiences lies in providing innovation in the local governance and, in some ways, in preparing the metropolitan contexts to the reform is relevant. In this phase, however, these local processes have to face with the different meanings attributed to strategic planning by the Delrio reform. While the early strategic plans can be considered the outcome of highly flexible and collaborative planning processes, aimed at providing long-term vision of development, sometimes based on variable geographies, the reform attributes to strategic planning a much more conformative role. The “new” strategic plans, in fact, shall be prepared with the aim of providing a set of mandatory guidelines for the different policies to be performed by the metropolitan city within a time frame of three years. It is clear the intention to streamline the planning processes respect to the new planning powers attributed to the MCs, but it is clear that this choice could lead to the marginalization of those actors with no formal role in the plan’s implementation. As a consequence, metropolitan strategic planning appears as one of the fields where a rebalance between governance and government approaches is taking place, with an apparent predominance of the latter over the former.

## **5. Conclusions**

The creation of a metropolitan level of government in Italy is the result of a process, still not concluded, lasting around 25 five years. The main steps of this process are the first reform enacted in 1990 (largely unrealized), the recognition of the metropolitan cities in the Constitution in 2001 and the approval of the current legal framework (Delrio reform) in 2014. Over this long time, the question of metropolitan areas has been often invoked within the political discourse, but almost never was the recipient of relevant public policies, with the exception of some sectoral – sometimes urgent – interventions in fields such as security or against the housing pressure.

It is only in the last few years that the implementation of the reform has led to a new focus to the urban question and to the greater cities particularly. In this paper, it has been widely discussed how, despite this renewed attention by scientists and policy-makers towards urban issues, it is not clear the emergence of a national policy for cities. This, despite the pressure of the European policies for the setting of a national urban agenda and many indicators demonstrate as the Italian cities are still the place of unsolved social and environmental problems.

The implementation of the Delrio reform itself is encountering difficulties due to the highly fragmented institutional systems and the variable responses that every local context is giving in terms of governance innovation. It can be noticed that, although the reform is forcing the metropolitan authorities to set totally new organisational arrangements, in the places where strategic planning experiments have been carried out at the metropolitan scale (like Turin and Bologna) the new

governance system is taking shape more easily. On the contrary, in the autonomous regions, but more generally in the Southern regions, metropolitan government is still lagging behind. This will make the setting up of metropolitan government in the whole country a process that will take longer time than expected and that will likely lead to further divergences in terms of policy-making effectiveness.

From an opposite (and more optimistic) perspective, it may be argued that urban-regions are catalysing political attention as never before. The national programme PON Metro, for instance, maybe considered as the first “explicit” development policy for the metropolitan areas in Italy. It was conceived with the intention to strengthen the birth and implementation of the metropolitan city, as well as to push the greater cities to deal with urban problems (digital agenda, social inclusion, energy consumption) addressed with no continuity in the recent past. Other more recent measures, as the “development pacts” that national government is agreeing with many metropolitan cities, are trying to further support the PON Metro implementation and compensate the investments on the policy fields still uncovered.

It is widely recognised in the literature that these efforts will not ensure the effectiveness of metropolitan government in a short time. On the contrary, it is argued that this phase of institutional rescaling could bring new political tensions. It should be recalled, in fact, that the failure of the previous attempts to creating metropolitan government must be attributed to the fear of the national and regional governments to lose control over the territories and, from the bottom, of the municipalities of being dominated by the metropolitan capital. In other words, while the national government is increasing its interventism on the local matters in order to secure the new institutional asset, it can be also perceived as an interference on local governance and slow the rise of metropolitan government. Many observers have claimed that this risk can be prevented only by the emergence of new metropolitan leaderships able to make local actors conscious of the advantages of the metropolitan dimension and to empower the metropolitan cities as strong counterpart in the negotiation with national and regional government.

With these political and institutional variables, we can argue that innovation in the planning practices shall be evaluated case by case. On the one hand, it is clear that (despite any local conflictuality) the commitments required to each metropolitan authority will lead the system to a kind of equalisation of approaches and methodologies all over the country. On the other, the legacy of previous experiences as well as the rooted institutional capacities in the public system will remain crucial factors in order to link planning to effective policy-making. For this reason, as widely stressed by many scholars cited in this work, a national policy for cities and metropolitan areas may not be separated by the need of a more comprehensive and integrated policy for regional development.

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