

AREA VASTA 2.0
A NEW FORM OF LOCALISM IN ITALY: CHALLENGES, RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES
FOR SPATIAL PLANNING ACROSS LOCAL BOUNDARIES¹

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Keywords: joint planning, strategic planning, duty to cooperate

Abstract

The papers aims to understand the forms and outcomes of cooperative spatial planning practices at a supra-local level in Italy. Assuming co-operation as one of the key challenges for planning strategically across local boundaries, the research will deal with the rescaling of formal planning activities carried out by joint local authorities, under a cooperative attitude that, in a Localism era, is supposed to replace sub-regional planning strategies.

The research focuses on the changes occurring in the Italian planning system after the Laws n. 135/2012 and 56/2014 that, in the name of the spending review, obligate the 10 main regional cities to form joint metropolitan city governments by abolishing the provincial level, and municipalities with certain population requirements to come together into “Unions of competences”, including spatial planning.

Of course, the need of co-operation on strategic issues is not new in Italy. Some institutions have an old history of working together to address planning issues of common concern. Nevertheless, the emergence of cooperation as a duty certainly poses some questions concerning the redefinition of planning spaces and responsibilities, the role of the planner, the access to the cooperative arena, the need for regional design practices.

Through the analysis of some medium cities socio-economic and spatial planning contexts, the paper discusses the forms of governance in place, the different boundaries they assume and the responsibilities they encounter. The aim is to contribute to a better understanding of the way strategic spatial planning can works in Italy, in order to define the issues to tackle and further directions for research.

1. The context: the arising of localism in Europe and Italy

In many European countries, important changes are arising both in the institutional system and in that of planning, for repositioning objectives, forms, tools and methods of planning in a context of increasing globalization, Europeanization and, at the same time, of growing of the importance of subsidiarity and of the local.

¹ This paper refers to the research project “AREA VASTA 2.0. A new form of localism in Italy: challenges, risks and opportunities for spatial planning across local boundaries”, that has just been founded (june 2015) with 0,5 million euros by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research within the framework of the prestigious SIR Programme (Scientific Independence of young Researchers) aimed to support young researchers at the start of their independent research activity. The Programme is designed for the funding of research projects with high scientific quality, developed by independent research teams, under the scientific coordination of a Principal Investigator (PI), either of Italian or non-Italian nationality, resident in or moving to Italy, who has been awarded their PHD (or medical specialty training) up to 6 years prior to the publication of the call for proposals (<http://sir.miur.it/>). The SIR programme is the Italian correspondent of the ERC Starting Grants, designed to support excellent Principal Investigators at the career stage at which they are starting their own independent research team or programme.

This paper is concerned with the forms and outcomes of strategic spatial planning practices at a supra-local level, dealing with the rescaling of formal planning activities carried out by joint local authorities, under a cooperative attitude that, in a Localism era, is supposed to replace regional and sub-regional strategies.

This issue is grounded on a debate involving the Western Europe in respect to the emergence of a widespread neo-liberalism (Waterhout et al., 2013), that has conveyed to processes of State space rescaling (Brenner, 2004) and a strong affirmation of localism. Although there are clear differences in its amount and real effects in planning across Europe, there seems to be a clear direction toward the rescaling of planning systems, that could be associated with reducing government. Indeed, every level between the national and the local is now up for discussion, and, in some case, even abolished, as happened to the English Regions in 2011. In other cases (and particularly in Italy) competences are nominally shifted between governance levels, making sub-regional/provincial spatial planning weaker.

To the rescaling of formal competences corresponds the increasing development of spatial visioning for non-statutory areas. In France, Germany, and the Netherlands, we observe an increase of spatial visions for all kinds of ‘new’ sub-regions or soft spaces (Haughton et al., 2010 for the UK), both at metropolitan level and at rural one. Cooperative planning practices engaged by neighbouring municipalities convey to different and quite fuzzy geographical regions, aiming at developing regional identities and mobilizing public, private, and civic stakeholders for achieving major competitiveness developing economic and territorial potentials, as proved by the French national policies for motivating such relatively voluntary planning processes, focusing on competitiveness and spatial development (Dikeç, 2006).

To this rescaling of formal competences corresponds the increasing development of Strategic Spatial Planning approaches based on strategic visions moving beyond administrative limits, so that they convey to the definition of soft planning spaces with fuzzy boundaries (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010).

The emphasis on strategic planning as a socio-spatial process (Healey, 1007, 2007; Albrechts, 2004) in the spatial strategy making process advocates the importance of collaborative and inclusive governance for developing regional identities and mobilizing public, private, and civic stakeholders.

Nowadays, the emergence of cooperation as a new obligation for Local Authorities certainly poses some questions concerned with the redefinition of planning spaces, the role of planners, the access to cooperative arenas. If these are typical problems of strategic spatial planning practices, the government expectation for plan-making authorities to undertake joint work on supra-local concerns affects issues of governance rescaling and accountability for planning.

In Italy these questions arise in a framework in which, in spite of several attempts of innovation of the national planning system (Lingua & Servillo, 2014) and diverse regional reforms (Campos Venuti & Oliva, DeLuca) – even after the failure of the “comprensori” season in the ‘80s and the proved weakness of provincial planning (Gerundo & Lingua, 2011) – the outcomes of already-in-place voluntary inter-municipal practices and the relationships between strategic and statutory planning have yet to be focused (Fedeli, 2013). Moreover, an interdisciplinary reflexion on the relationship between localism and the re-organisation of institutional levels could lead to a better understanding of their effects on inter-municipal and metropolitan planning practices and outcomes (Oliva, 2012; Sbeti, Feralino et al., 2012).

The paper analyzes the changes that are occurring in the Italian planning system and practices following the revision of the institutional system, as well as their impact on the system of governance

in planning at local and sub-regional levels, in order to define the issues to tackle, the challenges to face and the connected risks and opportunities for spatial planning across local boundaries.

2. The challenges of the Italian institutional reform to the planning context

The Italian planning system is still based on the original National Spatial Planning Law n. 1150 dated 1942, that organizes the competences of the land-use planning system into different levels in quite a hierarchical way, the plan corresponding to the level of the institution in charge.

After the reform of the Constitution in 2001, the State is responsible for guidance and coordination, while the subject of planning is constitutionally attributed to the regional institution, that is required to make indicative laws within the limits of the principles laid down by the laws of the State, nowadays changed in a more enhanced federal perspective. Being absent a territorial framework at the national scale, three tiers characterise the Italian planning system at the subnational level:

- 1) the regional plan;
- 2) the provincial plan (Piano Territoriale di Coordinamento Provinciale - PTCP) at county level²;
- 3) the municipal plan (Piano Regolatore Generale - PRG) at local level, that in some region is divided into two acts: a structural plan and an operational one (land-use regulatory).

Despite a reform of the national spatial planning law has no longer been on the agenda of the national government, new and most innovative spatial planning laws have been adopted by some regions, whose conception is in line with the substantial autonomy that Regions have gained with the reform of the Constitution in 2001.

In this framework, the municipal level, through different experimental forms of land use plans, remain the fundamental actor in managing the urban growth and the territorial changes³. All the reforms and the growing complexity of the planning system (including the use of different paradigms and the introduction of diverse tools according to each region) slightly affect the primacy of municipalities as main planning actors and the land use plan as main technical devise (Lingua & Servillo, 2014a).

However, the presence of 8,092 municipalities and 110 provinces, with different planning tools and different speeds of implementation, creating overlaps and conflicts between the different levels (Gerundo & Lingua, 2011), together with the global socio-economic crisis, in the last five years led to an important reflection on the cost of politics and the difficulties of territorial government.

² At the provincial level, the Territorial Plan of Provincial Co-ordination - (PTCP - Piano territoriale di coordinamento provinciale) contains prescriptions and indications on landscape and environmental constraints, which local authorities must conform to in the exercise of their respective competences. It determines guidelines for the different zoning according to the predominant use. It defines also the sites for major infrastructure and lines of communication, the areas for erosion prevention and water flow control, and the areas of nature reserves or parks. The plan may cover all the provincial territory. It has no time limits. Lower authorities (Municipalities), in preparation of their own planning instruments, may respect plan contents as a guidance and a regulation.

³ In the 1990s, the cultural debate led by the Istituto nazionale di urbanistica (INU - National Town Planning Institute) about the necessity to innovate the planning system found a fertile political context for proposing a new Planning Law (1995) in which the local planning level should be divided in two different acts: the “structural plan”, containing the future scenarios as the strategic vision of the territory, with spatial development strategies based on structural characteristics of the territory as peculiar invariants; and an the “operational plan”, containing the land use indications that pursue the contents of strategic plan. Despite no longer being on the reform agenda of the national government, the INU’s proposal became an important reference for some of the new and most innovative spatial planning laws adopted by some regions from 1995 to 2000 (e.g. Tuscany, Liguria and Emilia Romagna), and then in the new millennium spatial planning laws (of Lazio, Veneto, Lombardy etc.), whose conception is in line with the substantial autonomy that Regions have gained with the reform of the Constitution in 2001.

In this context, the key words of the (Law 214/2011), promoted by Prime Minister prof. Monti, were those of cost reduction and simplification, even concerning the levels of government by the suppression of the provinces and the unification of small municipalities. On this trail, the actual prime minister Matteo Renzi conveyed to the approval of Law 7 April 2014, n. 56 (the so called “Delrio Law” from the name of the Minister in charge) that formally transforms the “provincia” in a second institutional level, in prevision of a change in the art. 117 of the Constitution to revoke it.

Actually, this series of laws and connected decrees provide the "reorganization" of local entities through a process of "rationalization" that includes:

1. the transformation of all provinces in second level institution, with non-elected assemblies and with a reduction of their competencies;
2. the suppression of provinces who insist on 10 major regional capital cities (Roma, Torino, Milano, Venezia, Genova, Bologna, Firenze, Bari, Napoli e Reggio Calabria) and their replacement with "Metropolitan cities", sub regional organizations which are attributed to the fundamental functions of the provinces and, in particular, of spatial planning.
3. the unification of municipalities with a population of up to 5,000 inhabitants, which have an obligation to associate the exercise of their competences (including spatial and land use planning), through the conclusion of agreements or the establishment of a “union of municipalities”⁴. In any case, the optimal size cannot be less than 10,000 inhabitants (or 3,000 in mountain areas).

De facto, the questioning on the role of provinces and this climate of constant change necessarily involve a deep reflection on the adaptation of planning tools and processes (Camagni, 2012). Indeed, different types of cooperation are emerging, more or less coercive, at different scales: the regulatory measures include an obligation to cooperation at sub-regional and local level, for municipalities submitted to defined roles for regrouping. The same obligation involves the municipalities of the metropolitan areas which have not yet ever undertaken processes of metropolitan planning⁵.

The municipalities that meet the demographic requirements, instead, remain excluded from the obligation. In these cases, outside the modalities of cooperation imposed by law, the weakening of the role of provinces, however, seems to prefigure the need for a greater use of inter-municipal or joint planning for strategic matters and issues of sub-regional interest.

Of course, this need has already gained good practices, but it has speed, times and methods differentiated according to the region. Forms of voluntary cooperation are already in place in some regions that provide and promote inter-municipal cooperation in planning (i.e. Emilia Romagna, Veneto), in addition to sporadic episodes in other regions, due to the need to jointly address strategic issues et sub-regional level, defining informal spaces of planning.

The *fil rouge* that links these practices is definitely that of cooperative governance, understood as the ability to work-with to achieve objectives of development and planning going beyond the mere administrative boundary (De Luca & Lingua, 2012).

⁴ This form is midway between inter-municipal cooperation and inter-municipal consolidation; member municipalities keep their legal identity but all functions are managed by the Union which is a sort of consortium.

⁵ Some metropolitan areas have already activated forms of cooperation for strategic planning (Turin, Genoa, Milan), but these have never led to forms of metropolitan spatial planning.

3. Strategic spatial planning in the era of localism: assumptions and principles

The context of change that has affected several European countries in the last decade has generated a considerable debate on the issues of regional and sub-regional planning. Firstly, it was focused on the potential of *strategic spatial planning* as a way of comprehensive planning, capable to get through previous regulatory land-use planning approaches, by improving engagement with stakeholders and the public in order to define long-term strategic visions (Albrechts 2010), improve integration across sectoral plans and activities (Tewdwr-Jones & al., 2010) and approach sustainable development in a wider perspective (ODPM, 2005; Raco, 2005). Criticism of this approach (Newman, 2008; Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010; Haughton et al., 2014; Kunzmann, 2011) addressed the incapacity to deal with these assumptions and goals with a win-win-win approach, and on the difficulties encountered by its planning tools (in particular at the Regional level) to address strategic issues in a relevant way and with authority, being approved by non-Elected assemblies.

In Italy, the debate has concerned the so-called “pianificazione di area vasta” (inter-municipal or “wide-area”/sub-regional planning), both in its formal aspects (the coordination plan drawn up by the provinces) and in the emerged spaces of soft planning (strategic planning and planning agreements on different topics, from urban renewal to territorial development). In particular, the Territorial Coordination Plan (PTC), which starting 1990 became the responsibility of the provinces, is intended as a new space of interaction which can embrace broader horizons than local plans, and lead to convergence sector plans including, especially, landscape planning.

Two decades of planning practices allow, on the one hand, to point out some deficiencies in the provincial planning (Lingua, 2011; Gerundo & Lingua, 2011), such as excessive “rigidity” of the plans, very long timing procedures, different speeds of planning between Northern (now in the second generation of provincial plans) and Southern Italy (where many provinces do not yet have a PTC). On the other hand, some planning practices at the intermediate/subregional level (inter-municipal planning, co-ordinate planning, planning agreements) are multiplying, carrying to significant rescaling in the spaces of cooperative governance (Zanon, 2013; De Luca & Lingua, 2012). In both cases, the considerable effort to open to multi-scalar planning, to sectoral coordination and integration (Swain et al., 2012; De Luca & Lingua, 2010), is not lost, but has led to a redefinition of the planning levels through the introduction of new paradigms and new modes of action.

Of course, the need of co-operation on strategic issues is not new. Institutions have an old history of working together and with other bodies to address planning issues of common concern. Nevertheless, the emergence of cooperation as a duty, i.e. as a new obligation for Local Authorities in all fields (not only in spatial planning), in both countries certainly poses some new questions, which are:

- the extension of cooperation, which is based on parameters (previous provincial boundaries in metropolitan areas, population in little municipalities) that are often divorced from socio-economic dynamics, territorial specificities and cooperative practices already in place;
- the presence of overlapping spaces of cooperation, between joint local development plans (coming from formal or informal spaces of planning) and development planning documents;
- the effectiveness of cooperation: the duty to cooperate implies that all relevant government over local issues, if affected by the plan, ought be involved. This results in a rescaling of cooperative governance in spatial planning, which takes varying boundaries. At the same time, the duty to cooperate cannot become a duty to agree (Geoghegan, 2012), so what does it happens in case of disagreement, conflict or refusal to cooperate?
- the role of the planner, not only to demonstrate the link between plan and rules, but in activating practices of effective strategic planning across local boundaries;

- finally, the effectiveness of cooperative planning results, in terms of shared supra-local strategies, formalized in specific agreements or in a joint plan and implemented in local planning practices, that conveys to a need for activating regional design practices.

The redefinition of planning spaces, the role of the planner, the access to the cooperative arena are typical problems of strategic planning as a forms of collective action (Healey 2007, Albrechts 2004). But a voluntary practice in itself is now transposed in a context of obligation, where local planning authorities are obliged to cooperate on specific issues. An already focused concept is now putted into tension and has yet to be analysed in its full potentials for supra-local planning and its local implementation. The Italian planning system, being established on Provincial Plans abolition, now rely on informal arrangements for strategic planning: the governments expect plan-making authorities to undertake joint work on supra-local planning issues. This expectation affects issues of governance rescaling and accountability for planning.

4. Medium metropolitan cities in the face of localism: the issues to tackle

The literature review has led to define the state of the debate, for identifying the specificity and the common aspects of the process of localism that affects the Italian institutional system and that challenge the planning system in different ways and with different speeds. As a matter of facts, the metropolitan cities government are now in place, while the duty to union for little municipalities is delayed to the end of 2015.

Because of the obligation to revoke provinces governments prior to the 31st of December 2014, the metropolitan councils (composed by the mayors of all municipalities composing the metropolitan area and by the capital city major acting as the “metropolitan major”) are now in place and have already approved their metropolitan statutes. Nowadays, they are starting to deal with inter-municipal management of the urban region and the connected challenges for the governance system.

In such a dynamic framework, this paper refers to the analysis of the forms of governance in place, as well as of the different boundaries they assume into supra-municipal planning practices, in three Italian medium cities where the debate on joint planning is arising because of the non-correspondence between institutional boundaries and socio-economics, housing and population dynamics. The profiles of the practices are presented in Table 1.

The analysis of the Italian case studies has allowed to focus on the main issues in the debate and on their translation into practice. In particular, we identified four major themes concerning strategic spatial planning in the context of the institutional reform:

1. the **re-scaling of the statutory planning system**, that convey to a shift in scale and focus of planning practices and responsibilities
2. the **extension of cooperation** and the presence of **overlapping spaces of cooperation**, between joint local development plans and sectoral and economic development programs
3. the need, for planning officers and practitioners, to achieve **new negotiation and participation skills** in activating practices of effective joint planning across local boundaries
4. the **effectiveness of cooperative planning results**, in terms of shared supra-local strategies, formalized in specific agreements or in a joint plan and implemented in local planning practices.

Table 1. Italian Case studies profile

Case	Current Planning Instruments	Co-operation practices in place	Involved Authorities	Motivation for co-operation	N. of Involved authorities by Law 54/14 (Provincial boundary)
<i>A. Turin</i>	Regional territorial Plan Regional Landscape Plan Provincial Territorial Coordination Plan Local PRG (Land use plans)	Strategic plan (3rd generation) “Torino metropoli 2025”	18 municipalities	Socio-economic development	315 municipalities
<i>B. Florence</i>	Regional territorial and Landscape Plan Provincial Territorial Coordination Plan Local Structural Plans	- Structural development framework ('90s) - Strategic regional projects (Piana area)	18 municipalities in Florence province + n. municipalities in Prato province + n. municipalities in Pistoia province	Socio-economic development, further addresses for cooperation by the Regional spatial plan	42 municipalities in Florence province
<i>C. Naples</i>	Regional Landscape Plan Provincial Territorial Coordination Plan Local PRG (Land use plans)	-	[gravitational area composed by 173 municipalities: 92 municipalities (the whole province of Naples) + 36 municipalities in Caserta province + 35 municipalities in Salerno province + 6 municipalities in Avellino province (SVIMEZ, 1999)]		92 municipalities in Naples province

1. The re-scaling of the statutory planning system

The institutional reform conveys to a move of direct control over and ownership of the strategic-planning function at the local level (Gallent et al., 2013, Zanon, 2013). Nowadays, to manage this great shift, Italian local authorities could refer to three main frameworks:

- The strategic framework provided from previous provincial Territorial Coordination Plans
- Existing and new soft planning spaces
- The big picture of current municipal structural plans.

The first reference is the weaker one: planning activities of the Provinces started in 1990, in the framework of law n. 142, and in Northern Italy they are now at the second generation of provincial

plans, with some best practices whereas Bologna Territorial Coordination Plan is the most cited one. However, provincial plans were usually concerned with landscape and sectoral issues (as water and mobility management) and their strategic frameworks were usually affected by a lack of involvement of municipalities. That means that the vision of the provincial area they conveyed were not a shared one, and municipalities conceived it as imposed.

Existing and new soft planning spaces can be a possible way to achieve shared visions, whereas some of the ones created during previous strategic planning practices can be now formalised, and others may be opened (Haughton et al., 2013). However, the formalization of soft planning spaces seems to be a constraint in their development as pertinent planning arenas: can a Memorandum of Understanding or a Strategic Statement resist to administrative changes?

Finally, the big picture of current municipal structural plans has to be explored: being the metropolitan council just putted in place, a coordination in planning offices has still to be conceived. Joint political board, supported by Joint technical board are envisaged (see point 3) for systematising all the local strategies in order to identify common and conflicting visions and shaping a shared image of the future of the urban region (point 4).

2. The extension of cooperation

The defining and redefining of sub-regional boundaries convey to new planning spaces dealing with diverse functional areas. The extension of cooperation and the overlapping of functional areas and new planning spaces emerge as huge constraints.

The re-organisation of institutional boundaries is based on two parameters (existing provinces & population) that are often totally **unrelated** to territorial specificities and cooperative practices already in place.

Given that the obligation to union and to form metropolitan governments is not a duty to agree, after the revocation of the provinces a vast gap between functional areas and political convenience has emerged. Many difficulties in involving neighbouring authorities in a real cooperative governance process are due to different visions of the future development and to the balance of powers: political convenience or the perceived hierarchy or dominance can be a concern, as well as the perception that the partnership, being led by the mayor of the regional capital city, is not balanced in powers and financial allocations.

Finally, the reform doesn't take into account the presence of overlapping spaces of cooperation, between joint local development plans (coming from formal or informal spaces of planning) and sectoral and economic development programs. This is the case of the city of Florence, whereas the socio-economic gravitational area is extended to the neighboring provinces of Prato and Pistoia on the Pisa-Florence development system, as well as of the city of Turin, that is now conceiving the second strategic plan as an inter-municipal development plan among the municipalities of the first and second belt, while the metropolitan area is extended until Susa Valley, in the Cozie Alps.

3. The need for rebuilding governance structures and for new skills for planning practitioners

The dismantling of the provinces in metropolitan areas has led to voids in formal officer and Member governance structures at the cross-boundary, functional area or sub-regional level. These are now to be re-built to face strategic planning issues, in the context of the metropolitan government.

Concerning little municipalities obliged to convey into unions, in the shift from a provincial obligation for co-ordinating planning activities in sub-regional areas to a completely free discretion for local Authorities in choosing pertinent neighbouring authorities to cooperate with, these new “governance structures” have to face with diverse concerns: different visions of the future development as well as diverse expectations in the balance of powers and diverse views on housing provision.

If Localism represent a big challenge for planning officers culture (Sturzaker 2011), in the framework of the process of strategic spatial planning, negotiation and mediation becomes one of the main concerns. The discussion about the formalisation of soft planning spaces and the previous informal arrangements is the backdrop to some reflections on the role of planning officers and practitioners, as well as members.

The planning officers in the Localism Era are asked to act as collaborating planner (Clifford & Twedwr-Jones, 2013) in order to face the new challenge of metropolitan spatial planning. But even for tackling the issues of strategic planning there is a need for a more proactive attitude in setting-up and resourcing joint working arrangements, that was not required in a province-led framework.

The same skills become fundamental for members, mostly wherever the union with other municipalities remains contentious and is unwanted by local communities. A local authority councillor is asked to be able to meet the needs of his communities and fulfil his leadership role better through understanding the process and what his role can be in the context of the union or the urban regiona.

This concerns on the function of councillors seem to be lacking at the beyond-local level, conveying the State government to prospects a key role for the Regions, either acting as the co-ordinating body in setting-up the co-operative arena. Given the real difficulty for local members to deal with controversial issues connected with the processes of joining with other municipalities, a support from the regional government could be useful.

In any case, a joint political board seems to be the best solution to face strategic planning issues and to convey to the adoption of joint or aligned core strategies, because it avoid a process of continuous mediation between politician involved in the process and their councils and the resolution by committee on joint planning issues decreases decision times. Finally, the Joint political and technical boards guarantee transparency and political continuity in the planning process and delivery.

4. The strategic spatial planning effectiveness and the need for Regional Design practices

Being the metropolitan cities just born as formal government institutions, and the union of municipalities having to be shaped before the end of the year, the definition of **shared** supra-local strategies, **formalized** in specific agreements or in a joint plan and **implemented** in local planning practices is still a far away perspective.

Local authorities are still working to implement – whenever not to impose – their vision for defining the urban region and the priorities for its development. A great need for Regional Design practices is emerging (Lingua 2014, Lingua & De Luca 2015) for shaping the boundaries of the urban region and conceiving a shared vision of its spatial development.

Regional design is intended as an institutional process of common visioning, capable to shape the physical form of regions and to «portray a vital vision of what a region can look like, and how to achieve it» (Neuman, 2000:118). In this sense, representations of the urban region are generally

intended to indicate physical changes and to encourage debate on spatial planning coordination and responsibilities at supra-local/sub-regional and local levels.

Balz and Zonneveld (2014) relate regional design to a discursive dimension of planning concepts. They assume that spatial representations are used in processes of frame reflection by integrating and explicating analytical knowledge and allocating meaning in politics and policy-making.

In this perspective, Italian metropolitan areas are starting to engage in regional design processes that – through its discursive function –, are conceived as a pertinent ways for envisioning the spatial futures of urban regions, in order to enhance inter-municipal strategic spatial planning.

A Design-Led Approach to spatial planning is envisaged for systematizing all the current visions provided by the statutory planning system in place: municipal structural plans already provide a vision of the socio-economic and spatial development priorities of the Local Authority, without avoiding to collocate it into the dynamics of the whole urban region. The same does the Provincial Territorial Coordination Plan. Regional design approaches can convey to overcome limitations that the statutory planning system – strongly based on the local level – poses to inter-municipal planning.

This is happening in the Metropolitan city of Florence, whereas the *Regional design Lab* of the University of Florence has carried out the attempt to join local strategies for defining a common vision of the urban region, within the framework of the “Report on Metropolitan Cities” national research project carried out by the National Town Planning Institute (Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica – INU). This vision is intended as the framework within defining the spatial representation of the urban area.

Employing spatial representations of urban regions in argumentations about political priorities, territorial change and spatial transformation can be the way to engage collaborative processes among councilors of the new born “Metropolitan Council”, as well as planning officers, experts and the whole metropolitan community, in the formulation of metropolitan development strategies and projects.

5. Conclusion and directions for further research

The paper focuses on the changes occurring in the Italian planning system after the Law 135/2012 that, in the name of the spending review, aims to abolish the provincial level, obligating municipalities with certain population and territorial surface requirements to come together into “Unions of competences”, including planning, and obligating the 10 main regional cities to form joint metropolitan city governments.

The case studies of Italian medium cities governance dynamics in the phase of shaping the urban region and defining priorities for spatial planning and development has evidenced four main issues to be tackled. *The re-scaling of the statutory planning system* has to take into account three main frameworks provided respectively from previous provincial Territorial Coordination Plans, from existing and new soft planning spaces and from the big picture of current municipal structural plans.

The extension of cooperation is the main issue: based on two parameters (existing provinces & population) that are totally unrelated to territorial specificities and cooperative practices already in place, it doesn't take into account the presence of overlapping spaces of cooperation, between joint local development plans (coming from formal or informal spaces of planning) and sectoral and economic development programs.

For defining the pertinent extension of urban regions and putting in place the governance structures to manage them, planning officers and practitioners need to deal with the lack of coordination and communication, as well as situations of disagreement or conflict, given that the duty to union is not a duty to agree. So, planning officers and practitioners are asked to achieve *new negotiation and participation skills* in activating practices of effective joint planning across local boundaries

Joint political board, supported by Joint technical board are envisaged for systematising all the local strategies in order to identify common and conflicting visions and shaping a shared image of the future of the urban region. In this perspective, Italian metropolitan areas are engaging in regional design processes for envisioning the spatial futures of urban regions, in order to enhance inter-municipal strategic spatial planning.

The analysis carried out so far allows to trace some perspectives for further research, in an ongoing cross-disciplinary and comparative project finalized to understand the forms and outcomes of processes of cooperative planning practices at a supra-local level in Italy, within the framework of a widespread process of diffusion of Localism in Europe⁶.

Notwithstanding the obvious differences in the institutional systems and planning cultures, the research aim to provide a comparative perspective with other West European countries where this obligation is active since several time (i.e. the “agglomerations” system in France, introduced in 1999) or has just been putted in place (i.e. the obligation for municipalities to face strategic issues under a “duty to cooperate” in England, under the Localism Act 2011) or in other countries where the national or regional governments incentive cooperation (i.e. the “Regionale” in Germany or ongoing sub-regional planning practices in The Netherland as the process of “Regiona design” in place). Despite the strong differences between countries, Italy could take advantage from looking to these experiences, that have conveyed to questions and answers very close to the demands for change in place.

Of course, the need of co-operation on strategic issues is not new. Institutions have an old history of working together and with other bodies to address planning issues of common concern. Nevertheless, the emergence of cooperation as a duty, i.e. as a new obligation for Local Authorities in all fields (including spatial planning), certainly poses some questions concerning the redefinition of planning spaces, the role of the planner, the access to the cooperative arena. If these are typical problems of collaborative planning, the government expectation for plan-making authorities to undertake joint work on supra-local concerns affects issues of governance rescaling and accountability for planning.

The research aims to systematize the lessons learned from the solutions given to strategic issues in previous Italian and European sub-regional/ supra-local co-operative practices, in terms of shared strategies, in order to define:

- the pertinent extension of cooperation, in relation to the concerned issues and typologies of agreements
- a model for evaluating the effectiveness of cooperation
- a virtual platform for managing supra-local planning.

The research project approaches inter-municipal spatial planning as a complex system of interaction, influenced by several variables, that will be systematised through the concept of “platform”, conceived

⁶ In the framework of the project “AREA VASTA 2.0. A new form of localism in Italy: challenges, risks and opportunities for spatial planning across local boundaries” founded by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research within the prestigious SIR Programme (Scientific Independence of young Researchers, see note 1).

as a support both for implementing cooperative planning processes and for evaluating their effectiveness.

An evaluative framework will be thus outlined to assess the emerging co-operative planning efforts under the duty to cooperate, in terms of how they are changing local planning agencies capacity to manage their territorial systems. In order to explore how these developments may be really changing the concept of planning strategically across local boundaries, in contemporary times affected by localism tendencies, a systematic appraisal will begin by disaggregating such conceptual frameworks into different elements that can enlighten and implement the platform: rescaling of cooperative governance, definition of new planning spaces with varying boundaries, management of disagreement, conflict or refuse to cooperate. Assessing the efficacy of cooperative practices across local boundaries is conceived for informing and explaining what planners ‘really’ do and can do, not only to demonstrate that they comply with a procedure, but in activating practices of effective strategic planning across local boundaries.

Finally, the definition of an innovative technical tool is intended to overcome the limitations inherent the traditional processes of cooperation (lack of comparable data, need to compare simultaneously diverse proposed project). Planning, as a discipline, demands the dual engagement with academic discourse and professional practice and crucially requires research that moves from theoretical analysis and understanding to pro-active visioning and implementation via multi-disciplinary pursuits. The project, by involving advanced software developers, aims to develop a virtual geo-referenced interactive platform, specifically targeted to spatial planning and intended not only as a virtual platform for data sharing, but as a working space for joint planning.

The expected results are concerned with the definition of policy recommendations for joint supra-local planning, addressed to Local Planning Authorities and practitioners. The challenge is the redrawing of inter-institutional relations and spaces of planning on cooperative basis, for defining relevant planning visions across local boundaries within the framework of Regional Design processes.

The project is based on an innovative methodological approach to explore new paths for planning at a supra-local level. Planning criteria for inter-municipal and supra-local planning practices are defined and systematized through the concept of “platform”, intended both as a methodological grid for the coordination of the diverse issues affecting territorial and urban inter-municipal planning and as a virtual platform to be used by the involved authorities in managing supra-local planning processes.

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