1. Introduction: local and regional governance – a negotiated arena

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This new millennium arrived as a narrow walkway between information and informality, fragmentation of power and nationalisms, decentralization and concentration, privatizations and state ownerships, flexibility and order, democracy and hierarchic decision-making. Without clear routes, strong conceptual arguments and ideological stands, governance has been widely used to capture most of the diversity of ways to organize collective action and to deliver policies. It is said that the rhythm of walking sets the rhythm of thinking. The same goes with Regional and Local Governance. Most of the ways we have at hand to think about it result from the pace of change it goes through.

It seems as if history is moving too fast with regard to the ways subnational governance is organized. Which means that stopping and organizing a set of reflections and contributions on the topic may sound unreasonable, and ineffective. That has been, however, the main purpose of bringing together such a rich number of scholars, whose contributions to the related disciplines are unquestionable.

There is a wide agreement that in contemporary complex settings most of the problems can only be addressed through joint actions of multiple actors involved in different and, often, flexible arrangements, crossing sectors and tiers of government. The concepts of multi-level and inter-sectoral governance capture this in an interesting way since, together, they underline the fact that local and regional governments must interact with other levels of government and, within each one’s borders, different actors, from the public, private and nonprofit sectors, work together for common and agreed purposes. There is clear evidence that collective decisions tend to benefit from coordination on different scales, despite the criticism of the consequent failures in accountability and the loss of control over clear routes of decision-making.

Although the notion of governance is not new, the interest surged in the 1990s and has grown ever since, and is attracting increasing attention. Today it is one of the most widely used social sciences concepts. The fundamental insight of the dominant theory in the subnational field is that effective local and regional governance is achieved through building cooperation in an everyday more complex network of power and institutions, where organizational boundaries and responsibilities are blurred (Stone, 1989; Stoker, 1995; Mossberger and Stoker, 2001). As an analytical lens it helps to understand contemporary policy and politics, particularly by focusing on relationships, bringing into the analysis the way actors, tiers of government, institutions and multiple jurisdictions exchange resources, coordinate action and produce decisions with collective impact. The diversity of such lenses focuses on particular aspects of governance, from the role played by actors from different sectors of society to the way those collective arrangements are designed and governed. Other approaches aim at studying impacts and measuring how efficient and democratic are those mechanisms. By attempting to capture the dynamics and complexity of contemporary society, governance theories have been able to
provide the analytical tools to secure a better understanding of collective decision-making and of policy delivery.

This *Handbook* provides an overview of these multiple aspects. As the individual chapters suggest, the concept of local and regional governance is broad and refers to a significant number of specific aspects. In addition, it reflects its interdisciplinary nature and, by focusing on existing theoretical and methodological limitations, it provides new discussions of future avenues of research. By assembling such a rich diversity of topics, approaches and methods, I hope it may serve as a way to set the baseline for subsequent developments and refinements.

In order to establish a common framework for the chapters that follow, a definition of governance was needed in the particular context of local and regional settings, as well as a way of specifying the basic understanding of what aspects should be taken into consideration. This introductory chapter attempts to set the tone by exploring the advantages and limitations of the concept of governance and then by underlining the specific circumstances in which it occurs within a subnational context. This overview task dares to explore a tentative theoretical model to map what is at stake when studying this phenomenon and, consequently, to provide a more robust framework to the bulk of the *Handbook*. At the end of this chapter, I briefly explain the purpose and content of the main parts of the *Handbook* and outline the ways it can be used, particularly given its focus on future research avenues.

**A PROBLEMATIC CONCEPT**

Despite the popularity of the term, governance seems difficult to delineate. This is quite evident, given the fact that it is often presented in conjunction with a helping prefix. The ‘new governance’ that arose hand in hand with New Public Management, the ‘good governance’ popularized by the World Bank and the United Nations when assessing the quality of governing institutions, and the ‘corporate’, ‘global’ or ‘multi-level’ examples add to the number of cases where the concept relies on its qualification to be better understood (Ansell and Torfing, 2016). Subnational, or local and regional governance, presents another special example of such specificities. I will address this particular case in the next section.

There is a clear appeal of the term ‘governance’ in contemporary discussion about the way we govern ourselves. Nonetheless, the widespread use of the term has in its fuzzy meaning a problematic consequence: what do we mean by it? Have we gained anything by using the concept? This *Handbook* makes the argument for bringing the debate around the concept and its usefulness in the fields of political science, public administration and public policy. A starting point is that there seems to be a clear gap in recent literature about the exploration and careful consideration of the links between the efforts to conceptually explore the robustness and relevance of the term and the variety of grounds, features and dimensions it must encompass. Theoretical approaches to governance need to incorporate evolution and adaptability, as ‘change’, ‘adaptation’ and ‘reforms’ are the most common words in contemporary research.

Rather than searching for the meaning of such a variously used word, this *Handbook* departs from the claim that it is more fruitful to investigate its different aspects and the variety of contexts in which it is used. Particularly in a setting that already brings enough conceptual debate: local and regional governance.

The fact that there are numerous usages of the term is not a problem in itself but it directs our attention to its main assertion: there has been a shift in practice from strong and hierar-
chical governmental decisions towards more complex and networked forms of decision and implementation. Rather than a theoretical problem, this has set an empirical challenge that includes testing and identifying all new, fluid and multiple ways of governance. As argued before, ‘we use governance as our preferred shorthand phrase for encapsulating the changing form and role of the state in advanced industrial societies and a key facet of these changes is public sector reform’ (Bevir et al., 2003: 13–14). More than considering all modes of governing as encapsulated by the concept of governance, it has been useful to take it as an analytical construct to identify specific phenomena and to understand observed practice. Stoker (1998) did it by pinpointing five key features of governance, claiming that it included: actors and institutions from and beyond government; blurred responsibilities and roles of each; power dependence between those institutions involved; the possibility of having self-organizing networks; and new governing techniques, more related to steering and guiding rather than command and control.

This narrative, already identified before coining governance as an analytical construct, allowed a better understanding of the shift from a clear separation between those in government and those being governed to the complex relationships emerging from negotiation and power sharing. Rather than assuming that governing is a process that translates the state’s attempt to rule, it has been more promising to understand the ways different actors engage in such attempts. We have learned more from looking at this complex machinery not as the new mantra in social sciences, but as a way of identifying roles, ideas and relations of those engaged in collective action.

Early statements referring to the idea of a move from government to governance suggested precisely that there was some degree of an observable phenomenon corresponding to self-organizing processes of governing. Certainly, governance did not replace government but it has definitely transformed it. Government was no longer considered as ‘the player’ but as ‘one player’ in the game participating in different ways (directly, co-directing or even as a ‘meta-governor’). Rather than a theoretical creation with normative purposes (despite some evident attempts at transforming it into one), governance theory has allowed us to explore answers to the problems created by the fragmentation and distribution of power in contemporary societies. Besides the fundamental problematization of the role of the state, it explores new perspectives of empirical democratic theory, of collective decision-making, of inter-institutional collaboration, of co-production of policies and of managing public affairs across levels of government.

A distinctive feature in all these situations is that governing is more of a distributed process amongst fragmented institutions, through negotiated relationships with power and resource sharing, rather than a simplistic and monolithic single-agent action. Governance refers, thus, to the conditions for ordered collective action, while government refers to the formal institutions of the state and their power to decide and to enforce decisions. There is a baseline agreement that governance refers to the blurred boundaries between government and other agents in collective action (Stoker, 1995).

I believe that contemporary local and regional governance presents a specific context to explore such phenomena and pose fundamental theoretical and methodological challenges for a wide range of social sciences concerned to analyze the changing institutional and policy landscape of the contemporary world. However, it is in itself a problematic object of study to consider.
A PROBLEMATIC OBJECT

Change and innovation in governmental practices constitute a key feature of local and regional governance (Teles, 2016). Processes of democratization, public service innovation, decentralization and territorial reforms have raised the interest in this subject as a response to the recognition that subnational government capacity requires special attention. Such developments have had an impact on inter-institutional collaboration, resources distribution amongst levels of government, accountability, relationships between government and citizens, and policy efficiency.

This level of analysis poses several difficulties, besides the ones already identified and related to the concept of governance itself. The main one results from the definition of what local and regional refers to. The decentering of power and authority in many policy fields has complexified the puzzle of governance, not only with regard to the engagement of actors from other sectors, but also between tiers of government. This has placed a special focus on two main aspects of subnational governance – proximity and territory – fostering a discussion that challenges the common approaches to governance and adds layers of complexity to its conceptual definition.

Local and regional governance refers to those processes and rules of interaction between actors engaged in collective action with an impact on the public spheres below the national tier. The focus on networks and inter-institutional exchanges resonated well with the work of scholars who have been criticizing the classic notions of policy formulation and implementation as state-centered and as replicated in lower scales. A more open and flexible notion of governance arrangements has been gaining particular consideration. This is evident in areas where public innovation and flexible service provision is not congruent with formal institutions of government as the sole agents in public governing.

Local and regional governance mechanisms are increasingly seen as the big idea for addressing issues that are complex enough in scope and scale to require a diversity of knowledge and resources. The rise of a large number of governance agreements triggered academic interest in assessing both the choice of architecture and the intensity of collaboration, as well as the strengths and limitations of governance instruments. Existing research, however, tends to focus on the institutional and external aspects of the phenomenon, largely ignoring the impact of coordination, capacity and accountability. While local and regional governments are expected to maintain a role as a facilitator, they also face institutions that are not directly subject to democratic controls, which can erode the position of subnational public authorities and ultimately lead to problems of democratic legitimacy. Other stakeholders should also strive to avoid being instrumentalized, leading to a reduced opportunity to influence policy orientation or substantive content, creating obstacles to innovation. Working across these institutional lines and unclear boundaries also requires the ability to consult and stimulate the consensus of a set of subnational actors. Therefore, a second important dimension of governance arrangements relates to their capacity. It implies the ability to manage the aggregation of divergent interests, while reaching agreement on solutions and maintaining the consensus negotiated among the actors. Finally, although much of the research has focused on the benefits of proximity and economies of scale, there are often problems related to issues of legitimacy and democratic control. In general, despite theoretical and empirical debate about the complexity of local and regional governance, research has theoretical limitations and relies
excessively on the analysis of successful case studies. Little attention has been paid to developing a systematic approach to mapping complexity and understanding its inner workings.

Reform trends related to decentralization processes, territorial and functional reorganization, multi-level coordination, economies of scale, interlocal cooperation, and modernization and innovation in public service delivery have had a significant impact on the subnational governance landscape. Furthermore, all these trends are clearly interrelated. Despite the popularity of concepts such as public value, new public governance and joined-up governance, there is a dispersion and conceptual diversity that is not equal to the hegemonic predominance that the New Public Management had amongst public administration scholars in particular. Tools to better understand this context and its evolution are, thus, needed.

Recent decades have also brought methodological innovations, allowing for a more secure assessment of causal relationships in some kinds of reforms, particularly territorial ones. Despite that progress, scholars are still far from reaching a unanimous conclusion about the multiple dimensions of subnational governance. At the same time, it is clear that most contributions have not been disseminated and absorbed so far by policymakers, who continue to implement their policies on the basis of very simplistic assumptions, which find little evidence in the empirical data.

At the same time, the last two decades have brought an unprecedented breakthrough in international comparative research of local and regional governments, particularly in the European continent. Researchers were mainly focused on their own country-cases, and the exchange of knowledge and results was quite innocuous. Comparative studies were mostly limited to two or three countries. The typologies of local government systems were dominant, though limited in scope, and basic in their historical institutionalism nature, with several limitations in capturing the diversity and richness of subnational governance experiences (Teles et al., 2021). Recent years have contributed very significant collective works, trying to analyze – according to uniform methodological frameworks – the changes that are taking place in the local and regional government systems of several countries.

There are still many important issues to discuss. Questions of context, such as: the right to self-government; tensions in governance; decentralization and autonomy; trust and local governance. Questions of democracy: representation at the subnational level; roles of elected representatives; participatory subnational democracy; innovation in accountability and information. Other questions of governance: policy development and innovation at the local level; corporatization; performance management and accountability; regional and metropolitan governance and collective action; multi-level governance; inter-municipal cooperation. And there are a set of challenges that subnational governance faces that require special attention and discussion: polarized cities, migrations, sustainability policies, social integration and cohesion, technology, and e-governance. Regarding politics: on place-leadership; gender and local politics; transparency and corruption. Regarding territory: the challenges of suburbanization; intra-municipal decentralization; territorially based innovation. And problems to be discussed by academic disciplines: for example, on methodology, on geographies of knowledge, and centers and peripheries of research.

It should be noted that this selection, illustrating trends and challenges, is very subjective, and at the same time limited. I’m sure that the chapters included in this Handbook will certainly contribute to explore most of these aspects raised by the endeavor of addressing the specific features of local and regional governance.
This *Handbook* is not about local and regional structures of government and administration. Local and regional governments would imply a different approach to the book, and ultimately a different understanding of what subnational governance is about. Perhaps this is a good way to justify the need to explore a bit further a tentative theoretical model to grasp such complexity.

**TOWARDS A MODEL OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNANCE AS NEGOTIATED ARENAS**

In this section I argue that theory models are related to a kind of object: the map. They share many properties, as both are partial simplifications with limited accuracy of the phenomena they are depicting. But most importantly, both are purposeful. The best way to judge the quality of a map is to check if it enabled us not to get lost and provided the information we needed to understand a particular location. Thus, its true measure is usefulness.

A theoretical model of subnational governance will only be useful if it enables any or more of the following roles to be performed: it should provide the basis for adaptation and evolution; it can serve as a way to collect and organize dispersed results, evidence and facts; it might provide explanations to a specific mechanism or phenomenon; or it can generate predictive information. Most of the existing governance theories seem to have performed these last roles, since their explanatory capacity has been relevant over the last decades. On the other hand, their organizational capacities are still to develop.

My argument is that a useful theoretical model about the way subnational politics and policy work should be viewed as a tool to facilitate understanding. As with a map, the questions regarding its accuracy and truthfulness are inadequate, since all should be inaccurate and falsify reality to a degree in order to be purposeful; this means to provide a way to grasp the phenomenon we are dealing with and to understand how to ‘navigate’ in it. This does not mean, of course, that it should be divorced from reality, but it must provide some similarities in its nature to be accepted as useful for a particular purpose.

A theoretical model of subnational governance must, therefore, take these concerns into consideration. To do so, from the alternative roles available, it seems obvious that scholars still lack a coherent way of defining, organizing and collecting disparate empirical information under a single framework. This organizational role of theoretical models (Clarke and Primo, 2012) allows to describe the world by a way of ranking cases, classifying specific aspects, or presenting basic assumptions on how it works. The way to assess the usefulness of such a model results from a simple answer to the question: does it help in better understanding how cases are selected and connected? In other words, is it able to subsume observable phenomena into its suggested view?

Theoretical models are essential for good research on governance. The unmediated access to the world is a chimera and particular lenses are always in place when scholars attempt to explore and understand a specific phenomenon. They allow us to interpret particular events, connect actors, attempt to explore new motives and to define the limits of our understanding. Interpretative schemes and causal models facilitate the systematic analysis based on theoretical stipulations. The rise of governance research has already resulted in a number of such attempts. However, I believe that there is a sense of urgency regarding a systematic and accessible overview of the different aspects of local and regional governance under a specific
lens. Part of the attraction is that the diversity of approaches, some fluidity in the concept of governance, and the complexity of the local and regional settings have led to an intricate set of multiple aspects that can be taken into consideration. Most problematic is the fact that there is no consensus regarding the relevance, ranking or even usefulness of such aspects.

Despite being purposefully broad, some definitions have drawn the attention to partial features of governance. From perceiving it as the co-production of public policies through partnerships between government, private sector and civil society actors, to being presented as the formation of collective will through a system of rules shaping and regulation of actions, they have not added much to the more familiar social sciences concept of politics. Another proposal, such as Jessop’s (1998) definition of governance as ‘the heterarchy of reflexive self-organization’, implicitly assumes the intrinsic values of civil society self-government as more egalitarian and even more democratic. Bevir and Rhodes (2003), on the other hand, with a post-foundational view on governance as a neoliberal narrative, do not refer to specific institutions or to the boundaries of the concept, which makes it harder to address particular phenomena. Finally, authors like Kooiman (1993), Scharpf (1994) and Klijn (2008) also leave the concept too open and allow for endless interpretations.

Building on broad definitions, there is a need to answer very specific questions: what and who is governed, and how? The main differentiating claim here, when compared to previous familiar notions of politics, is that no single actor has the resources and power to govern alone. Interactions are inevitable. Governance is, thus, made up of the successful and unsuccessful political and institutional processes through which decisions are taken and implemented, since, as Bob Jessop notes: ‘failure is a central feature of all social relations’ (Jessop, 1998: 30).

This debate over the last decades has encouraged scholars and policymakers to look beyond government to evaluate the appropriateness of collective arrangements and the efficiency of governmental actions. Subnational governance occupies a particular position within the broader governance architecture, as it is especially dependent on the institutional arrangements that determine its interactions with other tiers of government, and other upper and lower tier actors. Besides this vertical setting, collaboration between scalar actors, from multiple sectors beyond the public sector, adds to its special condition. In addition, policy implementation has witnessed a significant degree of integration between areas, which raises questions regarding traditional approaches to policy coordination.

The amount of interaction between tiers, of collaboration amongst actors and of integration between sectors, is never a set recipe, but rather a flexible and adaptable menu resulting from specific circumstances: territorial, political, ideological or administrative. The way these ‘ingredients’ are established, brought together and put in motion relies significantly on the negotiation between those actors involved in the process. This negotiation of approaches of subnational governance results in multiple tensions, and ultimately in an observable equilibrium. It is within these emerging tensions that subnational governance emerges as an institutional entity that not only requires evolved methods, multidisciplinary approaches and specific analysis of a set of sub-dimensional aspects, but also deserves a more theoretically ambitious approach.

Defining subnational governance as an interaction process creates problems. We cannot easily assess, especially in terms of quantitative measures, whether regional governance in a particular country is more or less effective. Nevertheless, it provides a useful framework for considering the effectiveness of local and regional governments and citizen organizations in it. One just needs to agree on what dimensions of analysis to take into consideration.
Our proposed concept of subnational governance follows the practice of considering government rather than state. This recognizes, on the other hand, that individuals and groups can exercise control, through systemic mechanisms, over collective action, besides government. An institutionally based focus on multi-sector actors is sufficiently flexible to recognize that the relationships between societal actors (governmental or civil society originated) can be used to exercise control over collective decisions under particular circumstances.

Politics frames the illusion of domination over the collective future, through processes of questioning the prevailing forms of living together. Within this scaffold, governance is conceived as a negotiated controversy about enforceable collective rules to steer society. Irregular and unbalanced interactions between governance actors can result from designed or unpredicted opportunities to engage in such negotiation arenas. Politics is supposed to perform a role in specifying which, how and to what purpose actors are involved in such arenas.

This is not the main purpose of the present volume; nonetheless, advancing an Arena Model of Local and Regional Governance has, somehow, emerged with a certain degree of inevitability. The interaction, collaboration and integration setting need to be considered if governance negotiation arenas are to be studied. The arena is, therefore, the ideational space that structures governance arrangements. This space is where actors with specific attributes engage in repetitive interactions, within a context determined by tensions, and mediated by a set of governance narratives – those inherited, discussed and shared contexts for collective action.

With this suggested lens on subnational governance as a negotiated arena, emerging tensions, as well as the rules of negotiation, the context and actors’ attributes require a particular attention from research. A model that allows the understanding of the phenomenon to be mapped and organized should, therefore, consider particular features of this arena: actors, since their attributes encompass motivations, interests and resources that are brought to the negotiation and to the role they perform in a particular governance arrangement; democracy, and other mechanisms of discussion and decision-making, translating the rules of negotiation and existing tensions that give form to the considered arrangement; place, since particular spatial and contextual attributes are relevant to frame the conditions for a given governance setting; scale, as – inevitably – within a subnational governance context the relations of scale and interactions between tiers of government are determinant to the ways the arena is formed; and, finally, networks, which constitute the mechanisms resulting from the way a negotiated arena translates into particular interactive arrangements between actors. Therefore, local and regional governance rests on the result of tensions, rules and attributes whose outcomes determine temporary institutional arrangements for collective action and decision-making on public affairs at a certain territorial scale.

It is this Arena model that requires a purposeful map, allowing the multiple aspects of subnational governance to be understood. The five-dimensional approach suggested in this introduction is the one chosen to give structure to the bulk of this *Handbook* (Parts II to VI).

**BOOK STRUCTURE**

The volume is organized in seven parts. This introduction aims at exploring the difficult borders between what constitutes subnational governance and what distinguishes it from other disciplines, and other policy and politics arenas, especially the more traditional approaches to the topic, based on the analysis of national political arenas. One of its central purposes has
been to offer an accessible point of entry into the multiple features of local and regional governance, through a model able to provide a comprehensive but organized map of such features. As with other possible frameworks, there is more than one way that the volume could have been organized. In charting this model, I built on the distinct goals that I had for this volume: to provide theoretical and empirical context to the debates on local and regional governance, to organize the multiple approaches and dimensions usually under consideration, to make it a point of reference for future analytical discussion and, finally, to establish a strong baseline that might inspire future research.

The first part (I) is focused on the context. It presents contributions on core theoretical and overarching themes that delineate contemporary debates on subnational governance. It would be impossible to cover all available contributions; however it provides context for the key ideas and illustrates how relevant theoretical and empirical debates are required. Five chapters address issues ranging from metagovernance and spatial dimensions to what constitutes effective governance. A discussion on the right to self-government, the relationship between trust and local government, and a presentation of the autonomy and decentralization landscape in a wide number of countries are also presented.

The next five parts (II to VI) are structured according to the previously suggested main dimensions. Part II explores the role of actors in local and regional governance: from citizens and citizenship concepts to the role and attributes of elected agents, mayors and councilors. Part III is focused on democracy, and addresses elections and electoral systems at the local and regional levels, as well as contemporary challenges of citizen participation, transparency and integrity. Part IV underlines the relevance of place, not only by directly analyzing its importance for political leadership, but also through bringing to light some particular aspects related to policymaking, social challenges, sustainability and land-use functions. Part V explores scale in a set of chapters that charter reforms and changes in local government systems, and address particular features of metropolitan, regional and inter-municipal governance. Part VI investigates the way several kinds of networks shape and are shaped by governance arrangements: inter-municipal networks, intergovernmental relations, multi-level governance, public and private sector links, and digital networks through emerging technologies.

The final part (VII) addresses specific issues related to the disciplines and the studying of local and regional governance. Three distinct contributions are presented here: on new methodological approaches to the study of subnational governance, on teaching these subjects and on the centers and peripheries of knowledge production in the field.

Each of the following 32 chapters provides readers with an informed easy access to particular features of local and regional governance and their main points of interest. By devoting an equal number of chapters with a solid theoretical focus and with a strong empirical background, all the authors explain why these are salient. By addressing central questions related to subnational governance, these chapters offer ideas and contribute to the future research avenues.

This Handbook collects multiple contributions from these complementary perspectives, both theoretical and empirically pertinent, exploring the main developments in the field. It aims at providing a rich overview of the field as well as keeping the debate alive, while looking for a clarification of the scope of the discipline and the object under analysis. Acknowledging the relevant contribution of existing volumes and handbooks on local and regional governance, this volume presents one major difference: it is not focused on a descriptive country-by-country analysis of institutional design, subnational arrangements and governance structures. Instead,
it adds significantly to existing publications, since it aims at providing tools, information and research questions to students and researchers (as well as to the general audience interested in this topic) to better understand and further explore the field.

This Handbook aims to present a comprehensive picture of local and regional governance research across different social sciences disciplines. It discusses the theoretical concepts that are relevant and frequently used and provides an overview of competing analytical lenses for studying them. Finally, it presents a set of future avenues of research that will continue to fuel the interest on the topic. The theoretical driver of the Handbook will help to gauge the breadth of dimensions under consideration and will draw attention to the particular aspects that need to be studied.

I hope this volume will find a broad readership and that it will prove helpful in providing a solid theoretical and empirical basis for studying the multiple aspects of local and regional governance. In addition, people with a professional interest in the topic will be able to use it to develop a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the approaches to subnational governance. The Handbook can also be used by established researchers who want to assess the breadth of different dimensions of local and regional governance, or by those looking for further avenues of research. Finally, graduate and postgraduate students will find the Handbook helpful in providing easy access to core themes and use it as a source for clarifying concepts and for understanding the multiple aspects of research on local and regional governance.

REFERENCES


