5. The unaccomplished quest for urban policies in Italy. ‘Waiting for Godot’ in the country of one hundred cities

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the national scientific debate has intensively discussed and lamented the lack of a specific and explicit national policy framework for urban areas in Italy (Urban@it 2016, 2017; CSS 2011; Cremaschi 2006, 2008, 2010). The country has been suffering for decades from the absence of a clear strategy to tackle the urban question and explicitly support cities to address it. Thus cities have been engaged in lobbying at the regional and national level for a long time in order to gain more attention and resources; their main networks and associations are particularly active in trying to make evident the need for specific attention to cities in the policy agenda. At the same time, they have developed their own local responses to the lack of national urban policy, often taking advantage of the innovation coming from international urban agendas and policy debates.

The current situation can be considered the outcome of a complex interplay between different factors. In 2014 several Italian universities constituted Urban@it, an academic think-tank whose aim is to explicitly argue the need for a national focus on the urban question (Urban@it 2016). Since then, a series of yearly reports edited by Urban@it have made evident the peculiarities of the situation, shedding light on some of the structural characteristics that Italy shares with other European countries.¹

On the one hand, the general hollowing out of the national state in favour of a decentralisation process started in the 1970s (Brenner 2004) and has dramatically reduced the role of central government in several fields. More recently, some opportunities generated at supranational level have brought new attention by the national government to the urban policy field (Urban@it 2016, 2018). This is the case of recent initiatives launched under the process fed by the Habitat III conference, but also the outcome of a long-standing tra-

dition of engagement within the European and international debate and action framework. Several cities have taken advantage of the innovative programmes promoted by the European Union (EU) in the 1990s and, more recently, of the 2014–2020 cohesion policy, either following the National Operational Programme (PON Metro) based on integrated sustainable urban development or applying for other programmes like the Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) where cities can have a more autonomous role.

On the other hand, over the same period, at local level cities have gained additional autonomy and legitimacy, working intensively at developing policy styles and innovations that have consistently impacted their capacity for action and their results. The country has seen a growing protagonism of mayors and cities with significant political effects. Several mayors have become important political actors at the national government level, sometimes being able to escalate their attention to the urban question to the national debate. Unfortunately, these initiatives have produced limited transcalar policy mobility (Urban@it 2016), having less impact on the national debate than might have been hoped for.

The consequence of both this new other-directed and inner-directed focus on cities is that, since the second half of the 2010s, a new cycle of explicit urban policies or programmes has emerged, although it still has a fragmented and episodic character. So much so that, as we will argue, we are still in a situation where the country seems to lack a strategic vision for the role of cities, despite having introduced several windows of opportunities for them. The result is that, paradoxically (see Caudo 2013 and De Leo and Ombuen 2018, among others), the country of ‘one hundred cities’ seems to be still ‘waiting for Godot’ (like Vladimir and Estragon in the famous play by Samuel Beckett), that is, a national urban policy, while the urban scene is crowded by initiatives that create a complicated jigsaw which is challenging to piece together from a scholarly point of view. In fact, both policymakers and stakeholders are also struggling to get a clear picture of the current situation.

This chapter will illustrate this fragmented and unclear situation from three different perspectives: the lack of an explicit urban agenda and the current manifold efforts to generate a policy debate (section 2), the impact of the current cycle of cohesion policy and its limited capacity to influence policy mobility (section 3) and, finally, the recent initiatives promoted by the national government and the unaccomplished expectations of a national urban policy (section 4).

2. LACKING AN EXPLICIT URBAN AGENDA: THE NEED TO CONSTRUCT A PUBLIC DEBATE

Italy is known as the country of one hundred cities. The importance of cities in the history of the country has always been acknowledged (see, among others, Dematteis 2011). Nevertheless, since its foundation as a unitary state, and particularly during its history as a republic after the Second World War, Italy has never explicitly invested in a national urban policy (Donolo 2006; Allulli 2010; Caudo 2013; Vitali 2014). In 2011 the ‘Libro Bianco sulle città’ (‘White Paper on cities’), edited by Dematteis and promoted by a large number of Italian urban scholars (members of the Consiglio Italiano per le Scienze Sociali, CSS 2011), tried to highlight both the need and urgency to reconceptualise the idea of the city and the consequent need to innovate in the field of urban policies. The debate was relaunched in 2014 by a book edited by Calafati (Calafati 2014), which moved a step forward in addressing the problem raised by the Libro Bianco, indicating the need to shape an urban agenda.

In 2015, Urban@it (an association promoted in 2014 by Università di Bologna, Politecnico di Milano and IUAV, followed by several other Italian universities engaged in the urban field, with the pivotal role of a former mayor and Member of Parliament Walter Vitali, see Vitali 2014) tried to construct a public debate on the role of cities in contemporary Italy, their nature and their need to be supported by resources, ideas and a clear policy vision. Since 2014, through the yearly reports of Urban@it, experts have tried to distil the most important and open research and policy issues and provide a possible set of policy solutions to experts, policymakers and citizens. Following these reports, we can identify five key issues, among others, that need to be addressed, which is crucial for developing a description of the current situation.

The first urgent issue has to do with the need to reconceptualise the *nature of the urban in Italy*. Despite a strong historical relationship between the urban and the rural in the country, Italy’s urban imagination has remained mainly dependent on a traditional understanding of cities, being related to municipal boundaries (Dematteis 2011). This fact has influenced the outcome of any attempt to organise and institute forms of metropolitan governance or intermunicipal coordinated action, so much so that few changes have been registered in terms of urban governance, even during the last century. Still, large and medium-sized cities in practice share the same powers and autonomy. Processes of regionalisation of the urban have been observed and conceptualised since the 1960s (see for example De Carlo et al. 1963). Recently, academics and experts have also described the emergence of a new metropolitan (Martinotti 1993), regional or post-metropolitan dimension (see Balducci et al. 2017 a, b for a reconstruction of the debate over the last

20 years). Nevertheless, the city and its government's ideas have remained largely dependent on a model of municipal government designed in the nineteenth century and even before the construction of the national identity. This consistently limits the conceptualisation of the urban question in terms of both problem setting and problem solving. What is more, there is a growing need to reflect on the different nature of cities across the country, which vary from large urban conurbations to networks of small and medium-sized cities.

In particular, as highlighted by the 2016 Urban@it report, the absence of a national observatory on cities remains a crucial issue. At national level, there has never been a specific space for observing and collecting information on cities. Recent attempts by the network of Italian cities (ANCI – National Association of Italian Municipalities) to create a think-tank dedicated to cities and a recent research project funded by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers in 2017 are some of the few initiatives heading in this direction, together with recent works promoted by the National Statistics Institute, ISTAT.

At the same time, the recent institution of metropolitan cities with the Law 7 April 2014, n. 56 (the 'legge Delrio', named after the then Minister DelRio), has failed to initiate a new debate on the nature of the urban: metropolitan cities have been shaped on the basis of the previous provincial geography, in order to speed up their institution. The decision to dedicate the ESIF National Operational programme by the Italian government to metropolitan cities, has only partially given an answer to this problem, as we will highlight in the following paragraphs. The problem remains how can the country identify and develop a diversified policy for its differentiated urban conditions.

The second important issue is related to *the role that cities can play for the country in a wider sense*. Again, even though it has been evident for centuries that cities are the largest contributor to the economic growth of the country, both at national and regional level, the role that cities can play in national economic performance is still controversial. After experiencing structural change in the 1970s and 1980s due to a process of deindustrialisation, cities have then been deeply affected by the 2008 economic crisis. The implosion of real estate, which in the early 2000s was the leading driver of urban renewal, has shown the need to reinvent urban economies based on a new relationship between cities and their wider territories. The paradox, as highlighted by Giancarlo Viesti, one of the editors of the 2019 Urban@it report (Urban@it 2019), is that urban areas have witnessed significantly greater growth when compared to non-urban areas (Banca d'Italia 2018). At the same time, they perform much worse than urban areas in other developed countries, particularly in terms of the production of added value. In addition, while the urban areas and cities have high social and environmental costs, the social advantages of living in cities are quite limited. This situation is made even more problematic by the

restructuring of capitalism that is taking place, especially in the urban areas in the absence of a national economic strategy. The spatial consequences are quite evident, yet at the same time scarcely governed; the progressive reduction of public expenditure has further negatively impacted on the capacity of Italian cities to react to the restructuring of their economic bases and their role for the country. The question remains why and how the country should turn back to investing explicitly in cities and more generally given cities can be a solution for the problems of the country.

The third issue has to do with the contrast between the lack of a national policy and the *emergence of an urban agenda from below*; in the absence of a national framework, cities have not stood still (Urban@it 2017, 2018). Since the 1990s, when mayors became directly elected in the context of an important process of decentralisation that started in the 1970s, they have consolidated their role in several policy fields. Unfortunately, the growing visibility and legitimacy of mayors and local politicians has received limited support in the form of financial resources. This has resulted in consistent gaps between the new expectations of local policies and their real capacity for action. In order to find solutions to the urgent problems that affect their cities, mayors have been working hard to find resources to address in a timely manner policy problems such as the housing shortage; the shrinkage of the economic base and the need to renew it; the mobility deficit and the need to rethink people mobility; the environmental question as well as the deterioration of material welfare, basically built during the 1960s; and the changing demographic composition of cities including the growing ageing population. The need to develop a new alliance between public and private actors has become more and more urgent; nevertheless, a public–private relationship still remains far from being established. This has become even more problematic due to the restriction of public expenditures initiated by the 2008 economic crisis. The 2018 Urban@it report has clearly highlighted how the multitude of interesting local experiences is not able to feed into a national strategy.

At the same time, cities are experiencing the emergence of multi-actor processes. The new Urban@it report for 2021 will be dedicated to exploring an open issue, namely ‘who is governing the city’? It is in fact evident that the policy arena is becoming increasingly crowded and fragmented. Municipal governmental bodies are suffering, on the one hand, from their limited capacity to generate public participatory processes, due to the impoverishment and fragilisation of intermediate social classes, and, on the other hand from the emerging role of new translocal economic actors, which have impacted even more negatively on their capacity to react to the multifaceted urban question. Nevertheless, cities have promoted several interesting experiments, sometimes really valuable in their results, but, as Pasqui (2010) suggests, if it is possible that a national urban policy can be inspired by local experiences, it is also clear

that there is scope for understanding how this can happen and in particular to what extent extraordinary-situated and general, ordinary policies should be combined in making a urban agenda. In other words, can a localist view be a solution to a national problem?

The fourth and most important issue is related to the way in which the *explicit urban-related initiatives have been defined so far and should be rethought*. As we will see in the next paragraphs, some of the recent public policies promoted at national level have provided an interpretation of urban policy basically inspired by two keywords: ‘peripheries’ and ‘urban regeneration’. But, as the 2020 Urban@it report has clearly highlighted, the notion of periphery that forms the basis of public policies is quite traditional, and an in-depth understanding of marginality should be developed instead which is able to address the multifaceted nature of marginality and peripherality in contemporary cities. The same can be said for the term ‘urban regeneration’, which is also largely unable to deal with a policy integration logic aimed at fully and innovatively addressing the complexity of an urban agenda based on sustainable development goals.

Finally, as highlighted by the 2018 Urban@it report, the result is a still consistent gap between official and institutional policy responses to the urban question and the initiatives from below that so far have been promoted at local level or by way of sectoral innovation. The next section will argue this, reconstructing the last decade of initiatives, which has been characterised by an important effort to reconceptualise the policy problem and open a public debate, despite the limited results.

3. THE IMPACT OF THE LAST EU 2014–2020 POLICY CYCLE: EXPLORING THE MECHANISMS AND THE EFFECTS OF POLICY MOBILITY

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Italian cities were widely engaged in a programme of policy innovation promoted at EU level. In particular, the experiments launched under the Urban programme are still considered some of the most interesting policy innovations experienced both locally and nationally. In fact, also at a central level, those years saw a strong commitment to experiment with new policy models, with additional national initiatives inspired by the EU debate. As a result, since then, policy integration, public participation and public–private partnerships have become central pillars of the policy debate and programmes. One should also note that the definition of urban policy in Italy is largely intertwined with EU urban policy’s history; as a matter of fact, before the 1990s, urban planning rather than urban policy was central in the urban debate. As Fareri reminded us in 2000 (Fareri 2000, quoted in Pasqui

2010), ten years before, the most important public policy handbook, written by Bruno Dente (Dente 1990), did not even mention the field of urban policies among public policies. The reasons are manifold, but it must be remembered that the country had never conceptualised explicitly urban policies as such before the EU promoted the experiments of the 1990s. Of course, several sectoral policies had changed in a significant way the 'urban', producing a large set of urban facilities during the 1950s and 1960s. However, the results of the EU experiments, as discussed by several authors, have never really been fully assessed, and according to several scholars the experiments did not produce consistent and permanent innovation (Palermo 2001; Pasqui 2010). Indeed, it was in the late 1980s that the first Ministry for Urban Areas, although without specific financial resources, was instituted (the *Ministero per le aree urbane*, instituted in 1987 and active until 1993) and then turned into a Department of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers before being progressively detached from the competences of the Ministry for Public Works and partially linked with the Ministry of Infrastructures, under the DICOTER section, thus further weakening the policy framework. Following the urban initiative, the national government launched the Urban Italia initiative and later the so-called *Contratti di Quartiere*, largely inspired by the European urban *acquis* throughout the 1990s up to the mid-2000s.

This was strongly supported by a political cycle largely inspired by the rise of the new protagonism of mayors, which had become politically and democratically legitimised but also visible and accountable for the results (Palermo and Savoldi 2002; Tedesco 2003; Cremaschi 2006) in those years, especially after the laws of the 1990s which made mayors democratically elected.

The mainstreaming of urban policies, as proposed by the EU during 2007–2013, cast a shadow on the most interesting results of the 1990s, since locally they were only systematised and critically assessed to a limited extent. As a result, despite an intense decade of experiments mainly characterised by a new awareness of the importance of integrated action (linking the physical and the social dimensions), some of the most positive results have only been partially taken up at national level. What is more, Italy has remained in a certain sense more of a policy-taker than a policymaker (a downloader rather than an uploader) in this field, despite its intense experimental activity carried out by cities at the local level since the late 1980s. Nevertheless, the last years of this EU policy cycle were crucial for setting the ground for the innovations to come. In fact, in 2011, the first proposal concerning the institution of the CIPU (*Comitato interministeriale per le aree urbane*) and the need for formulating a national urban agenda was discussed in parliament, and the Monti government charged the new Minister Fabrizio Barca with coordinating the production of a new urban agenda for the country.

Under the following last policy cycle 2014–2020, the country has indeed invested in the urban question and dimension; this has happened at different levels and from different perspectives. At a conceptual level, Italy has consistently engaged with the debate on the new policy cycle. The general principles for the reform of cohesion policy have been transferred to the Italian context by a policy document edited by the Ministry for Territorial Development (Ministero per la Coesione Territoriale et al. 2012), headed by the same Fabrizio Barca, who had been the main rapporteur to the commission on the topic. Based on this strategic document, for the first time in decades, the national government was not only able to conceptualise the emergence of a metropolitan dimension in Italy but also to focus on the related policy and governance challenges (Ministero per la Coesione Territoriale et al. 2012). Moreover, the document provided an interpretation of the country as being made up of three different, but highly interrelated, socio-spatial formations in need of specific developmental policies, namely metropolitan areas, inner areas and the southern regions, particularly focusing on their cities.

Based on this innovative vision, Italy has developed its own European Structural and Investment Fund (ESIF) National Operational Programme dedicating the 5 per cent of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) allocated for sustainable urban development to initiatives promoted by metropolitan cities. The so-called Multi-fund National Operational Programme Metropolitan Cities 2014–2020 (PON Metro) has prioritised the largest cities and metropolitan areas (Turin, Genoa, Milan, Bologna, Venice, Florence, Rome, Bari, Naples, Reggio Calabria, Cagliari, Catania, Messina and Palermo). With the main objective being social inclusion, the programme has focused on the following main axes: 1) the digital metropolitan agenda based on the ERDF; 2) sustainability of service and urban mobility (ERDF), aiming at redesigning public services based on a digital agenda and a more efficient and sustainable mobility; 3) social inclusion services (based on the ESF – the European Social Fund); and 4) infrastructures (ERDF) dedicated to social innovation for the inclusion of the most fragile population segments and areas. The total budget amounts to 892.9 million euros, of which 588.1 million euros comes from the structural and European investment funds intervening at regional level with different financial intensity, with a special focus on the less developed regions. Generally speaking, the PON Metro is largely inspired by both the principles of integrated sustainable urban development and the place-based approach (Briata and Gelli 2018).

Nevertheless, its impact and role have been critically examined by several experts. In particular, so far, the decision to invest at the metropolitan scale has not been definitively supported by both an appropriate budget and a policy-design orientation. The focus has remained, rather, on quite traditional urban regeneration processes, many of which are concentrated in the

central cities of the metropolitan areas, and despite some interesting attempts to go beyond the city boundaries and business-as-usual projects, there is little evidence of a step forward. Moreover, there is quite clear evidence that the leading role played by the central level as the managing authority has limited the innovative potential of the initiative since its very beginning. In fact, it has suggested a quite traditional understanding of the city and the urban question quite in line with the local track records of urban regeneration policies, without promoting a strategic initiative and, to a limited extent, taking into consideration the innovation capacity and activism of local contexts.

This latter point is particularly evident when considering that Italian cities have been participating intensively in the Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) initiative and some of them with consistent success throughout the different calls for proposals of the programme. At the same time, with Italy being a regionalised country, with the role of the regions growing, the regional operational programmes have been able to further support urban-oriented policies with some interesting results, which, unfortunately, so far have not been able to feed a process of policy mobility and have remained quite local with limited successes (see in particular the case of Emilia Romagna, Balducci and Calvaresi 2018).

More interestingly, over the last years, the country has experimented with the place-based approach within the so-called *Strategia nazionale aree interne* (National Strategy for Internal Areas), inspired by the same original policy document of 2012 and dedicated to supporting more than half of Italy's small cities and villages, where 23 per cent of the Italian population is concentrated.² The programme is based on the idea that such contexts are worthy of a specific public policy able to reconnect them to policy innovators and aimed at reintroducing them in a developmental perspective, without losing their particular characters. Policy missions promoted at national level to support place-based-approach initiatives are at the centre of the initiative, which is one of the most interesting and innovative strategies designed for the country. Such a vision, according to many experts, could also be inspiring, methodologically, for the urban areas, but is still far from being delivered.

Finally, Italy has been also using the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) tool and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), as proposed by the 2014–2020 cohesion policy. ITIs have not been intensively used in order to promote a new urban geography, while CLLD has, on the contrary, been largely used in several urban and non-urban contexts with interesting results, in particular from the point of view of the creation of new governance alliances. According to the STRAT-BOARD dataset, Italy has promoted 185 strategies of territorial development and is the only country that has used all the tools made available by the 2014–2020 cohesion policy. In 11 cases ITIs have been used within urban areas, while 23 strategies have been developed

through CLLD.³ All in all, Italy has by and large respected the 5 per cent ERDF ringfencing for urban areas; in some regions, this has even been exceeded. Nevertheless, it is still hard to find a sound evaluation of the results and, more than that, a clear-cut reflection able to feed a new urban policy cycle for the country.

4. THE EMERGENCE OF EXPLICIT URBAN POLICIES, DESPITE THE LACK OF A STRATEGIC AND OVERALL VISION

Since 2010, several initiatives have been launched at the national level with the aim of supporting cities to deal with the urban dimension. Despite their strong interaction with the EU framework described above, many of them have been launched in the absence of a clear vision and strategy. This can be easily explained by the fragmented political situation of the country. After the ‘government of technicians’ led by Monti between 2011 and 2013, which brought the country out of the economic crisis, three centre-left coalitions, guided by Presidents Letta, Renzi and Gentiloni, have governed the country. The current government, led by Conte, was first supported by a centre-right coalition and then, since 2019, by a centre-left one. Five different governments, suffering from quite weak political majorities and limited political agreement, have run the country in less than a decade. At the same time, despite the changing majority composition, their centre-left orientation has provided a more city-oriented agenda, opening the debate about a possible national urban agenda, an issue almost left behind by the centre-right coalitions all through the 2000s. Moreover, during the Renzi government, some mayors became important political actors at the national level, thus bringing new attention to the role of cities (Renzi was formerly mayor of the city of Florence).

In this respect the first important act in opening a new phase for cities has been the Law decree 83, 22/6/2012, then converted into the Law 134/2012. Titled ‘Misure Urgenti per la crescita del Paese’ (‘Urgent measures for the growth of the country’), it related to relaunching the country after the 2011 economic crisis. It instituted, as we have seen above, the ‘Committee of Ministers for urban policies’ (CIPU) to focus on the urban dimension. Expected to become the reference point for the elaboration of a national urban policy, it initially contributed to starting a new exploration into the changing nature of cities, in particular launching a new production of knowledge through the idea of constituting a statistical observatory on cities. Despite the many expectations, particularly from experts and local policymakers, the CIPU committee was reduced in power over the decade and finally dismantled. Only recently, before the explosion of the Covid-19 pandemic, there were promises to reinstitute it. In the same period, the Law 134/2012 instituted

the so-called ‘Piano nazionale per le città’ (‘National plan for cities’) under the responsibility of the Vice Ministry for Infrastructure and Transportation, which, supported by Ance and Censis, is dedicated mainly to supporting urban renewal actions in degraded areas and the building sector. In total 224 million euros were made available, with cities all over the country applying for these funds (446 applications were received by the Steering Committee, see Caudo 2013), thus demonstrating the strong expectations of such a measure on the part of cities. An additional 94 million euros were dedicated to ‘Aree franche’ (tax-free areas) for urban renewal initiatives, thus also clarifying the fact that these first initiatives were inspired by a logic of economic development. This first initiative was followed by the so-called ‘6000 Campanili’ plan (6000 town bells plan), launched to support small and medium towns all over the country with physical regeneration processes.

A second and more recent step towards a more systematic understanding and action for cities was the institution of a special Parliamentary Commission on ‘Problemi di sicurezza e periferie urbane’ (‘Security problems and urban peripheries’) in 2016, aimed at providing usable knowledge in order to tackle an emerging policy issue and produce policy indications. The work of the Parliamentary Commission,⁴ involving the participation of a representation from the main political parties, has been based on both interviews with experts and field visits. The outcome, issued in a long and articulate parliamentary report (never really turned into a policy paper), has highlighted the need to formulate a new understanding of the urban question, and in particular of the concept of peripheries, able to feed a new focused policy treatment. Nevertheless, it has had only limited capability to impact on the sphere of policy design (Urban@it 2018).

Before, during and after the work of the Parliamentary Commission, the national government has been active on several different fronts. On the one hand, quite interestingly, the Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri (DPCM – Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers) 29 August 2014, n. 171 instituted within the Ministry of Cultural Activities and Tourism the General Direction for Art, Contemporary Architecture and Urban Peripheries, which has promoted interesting exploratory research on the concept of urbanity (Direzione Generale Arte e Architettura Contemporanea e Periferie Urbane 2017) and some opportunities and prizes for the best projects related to peripheries. The initiative was fairly innovative for its kind and has paved the way to a new approach to the definition of the problem of peripheries. On the other hand, on a more operative level, the national government launched some special resources dedicated to those ‘peripheries’ that the Parliamentary Commission was due to elaborate upon. A second initiative was promoted in 2014, under the name ‘Programma di recupero di immobili e alloggi di edilizia residenziale pubblica’ (‘Refurbishment programme for public residential

buildings and housing'), aiming to support the renewal of public housing and dedicating 468 million euros to the refurbishment of housing estates that have suffered from degradation. In the same year, 200 million euros was assigned to projects dedicated to reducing marginalisation and social degradation, but also to improving urban quality and the social and environmental fabric of the city. The following year, the government authorised the investment of 500 million euros in financing extraordinary interventions for urban renewal and security in the peripheries ('Programma straordinario di intervento per la riqualificazione urbana e la sicurezza delle periferie') with the Law 208/2015. Later in 2015 the PON Metro was launched, also supported by the PON Governance promoting, to the tune of 13 million euros, better urban governance in the same metropolitan areas targeted by PON Metro.

Finally in these years, the Italian government also took part in the preparation of the Habitat III conference in Quito in October 2016. All these initiatives were launched without the support of CIPU, which was never instituted, and by different governments, without the time and space for the elaboration of an overall strategy. The focus has mainly remained on supporting the role of cities in the light of the economic development of the country, but with limited resources, and on promoting the regeneration of the physical dimension, with a specific attention to certain urban areas, like urban peripheral neighbourhoods (especially public housing neighbourhoods).

Despite a considerable amount of resources being dedicated to the cities across the decade, a series of fragmented actions have resulted that are quite disarticulated and not even able to produce a systemic change, let alone an organised and coherent urban agenda. This has produced quite temporary results, often based on the mechanism of the call for projects that was inherited from the experience of the EU urban initiatives in the 1990s as a method to generate a new activism in cities but at the end of the day generated a too episodic approach to resources. The call for projects has in fact only in limited cases produced a real strategic process of selection; additionally, it has been not supported by a clear process of evaluation and assessment of results. On a more general level, the focus on peripheries has remained quite traditional, peripheries being identified as problematic public neighbourhoods of the main cities, often suffering from physical spatial problems associated with social inequalities (see in particular Balducci and Calvaresi 2018 and Bifulco et al. 2020).

5. CONCLUSIONS

This synthetic overview depicts a contrasting situation. On the one hand, after decades in which cities have been far from the political agenda (at least since the 1960s, with the so-called Progetto 80, see Renzoni 2012; Ministero del

Bilancio e della Pianificazione Economica 1969; Feiertag et al. 2020) there is a new attention on cities and their problems. But, if considered from the OECD perspective (OECD 2017), Italy is still lacking a national urban policy, due to the fragmentation of the initiatives under experimentation. Actually, in complex contexts such as the contemporary ones, it is increasingly difficult to deal with policies as the outcome of univocal and shared strategies (d'Albergo 2010). Therefore, it is not so surprising that the current set of urban policies appears to be the outcome of multiple and diversified strategies and expectations, rarely assuming the appearance of a coherent framework. The role played by institutional frameworks and political orientations towards cities has, so far, led to a new temporary centrality, though incomplete and dynamic, of the urban question, but not a definite and clear strategic vision and policy design.

In the face of the many urgent questions (environmental, social, economic) related to the urban that the country needs to deal with, the approach to regenerating the hardware still seems far from producing results, while the attempt to address the software fails to generate the innovation expected. In particular, what is evident is the contemporary difficulty of promoting encompassing policy frameworks like those (few) promoted in the 1960s and 1970s when the idea of the national state and public policy was more holistic and encompassing (Renzoni 2012). In parallel with the shrinking of the public action, urban policies have been additionally suffering from the lack of a strategic framework; this has deeply affected the country, generating differentiated models, cycles and styles of the regeneration of the urban. So much so that it is much more complicated than in the early 1990s to provide an overall picture of the state of the Italian cities – there is little space left for big narratives as in the 1980s. While cities like Milan and Turin have been, or still are, experiencing a new rising cycle based on a new role for real estate, often generated by extraordinary public events (such as the Winter Olympics, the 2015 World EXPO or the European capital of culture), others have remained stuck in their traditional economic rent cycles, fed, for example, by the tourist industry or specialised manufacturing, without being able to reinvent themselves. Still, the quality of life in some of the medium-sized cities of Italy is the highest in the country, despite the biggest cities being the only ones able to provide unique social opportunities, but where the social inequalities are also among the most severe.

Often fascinated by trendy mantras, the country remains less effective than it could be in catching up with the international debate. For example, the smart cities discourse during the 2000s has not really been able to generate a radical change, limiting its role to a few best practices, and has still not been able to grant, for example, digital accessibility to the inhabitants of medium-sized cities. The current cycle, thanks to the engagement in the Habitat III confer-

ence (UN-Habitat 2016), has seen a new interest in and role for the sustainable development perspective, which, according to many experts, can be a way to really address once and for all the urban question through an integrated and systemic vision, as the 2020 Urban@it reports suggests (Urban@it 2020).

What has become more and more evident is that the traditional centrality of land-use planning in dealing with urban problems should be rethought: planning itself has more or less officially and explicitly moved from land use to strategic planning, adopting new methodologies and focus. This has opened spaces for interesting local experiments, often promoted by city administrations, but only seldom able to produce an overall official reorientation at national level. Despite the state apparently taking on a new entrepreneurial role, the result of several decades of decentralisation reforms have produced a fragmented and uncoordinated action.

Indeed, as described in the conclusions of the 2018 Urban@it report, this complex situation made up of many experiments and little or insufficient mainstreaming, characterised by numerous open working sites without a strategic vision, is probably the current position of the ‘momentum’ of urban policies in Italy (Fedeli 2018). The country can count on a new focus on the urban dimension, based on a new political commitment at local, but also at national, level. Nevertheless, the proliferation and multiplication of the opportunities generated by this activism has reduced the impact of this special policy cycle in terms of systematising innovations.

The academic and specialised literature keeps highlighting the need for a space for strategic vision, able on the one hand to extend the critical reflection on the nature of the city in Italy, going beyond consolidated spatial imaginaries, and on the other hand to feed a new supply chain able to generate an original kind of explicit national urban policy, one supported by a transcalar collaboration between institutional levels and based on a *place-based* approach, and able to establish the reasons, practices and spaces for differentiated and coordinated urban policies for a country like Italy, which is constitutively urban in its nature. The emergence of an urban agenda based on local experiences can be the basis for the national level to elaborate, together with the cities, a new line of public–private action able to address the societal and economic challenges that cities are experiencing without the tools and resources needed to re-build the future urbanity of the country of one hundred cities.

NOTES

1. For a full list, see the website of Urban@it: www.urbanit.it; a synthesis of the yearly reports can be found at <https://www.urbanit.it/rapporti-annuali/>.
2. See the website <http://www.programmazioneeconomica.gov.it/2019/05/23/strategia-nazionale-delle-aree-interne/>.

3. https://www.fondazioneifel.it/documenti-e-pubblicazioni/item/download/3649_b0fb27c996671ed559f9b0c1e4b922ca.
4. The documents produced by the commission can be consulted at the website https://www.camera.it/leg17/522?tema=commissione_di_inchiesta_sulla_sicurezza_e_sul_degrado_delle_citt_e_delle_periferie.

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