

# Representing the Milan metropolitan region from a public policy perspective

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The present paper proposes a three-axis method for identifying metropolitan regions in a European context that was developed from a public policy perspective within the field of regional geography. Drawing on a harmonised definition of functional urban area and a case-specific literature review, the proposed method can be applied to urban regions characterised by multiple territorial development patterns. This paper focuses on the metropolitan node of Milan within the urban network of northern Italy. First, the concept of functional territorial scale is used to assess the city-regional scale of Milan. Then, based on available geographical descriptions of metropolitan Milan, the metropolitan region is defined as a set of labour market areas, rather than as a single metropolitan area. Finally, some demographic and employment trends that have characterised the Milan metropolitan region and its emerging territorial imbalances over time are highlighted. Having identified a metropolitan territorial unit of Milan, the paper outlines some linkages between city-regional development and metropolitan institutional policy.

## KEYWORDS

functional urban areas, literature review, metropolitan region, Milan, public policy, territorial development

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The local government reform approved by the Italian Parliament in April 2014 (Law no. 56/2014) restructured intermediate territorial institutions (*Province*) and replaced them with metropolitan institutions (*Città metropolitane*) in ten capital cities of administrative regions. Although the modernisation of the institutional framework of local governance had been part of the governmental agenda for a long time, the legislative provision that was finally approved was mainly directed at reducing public expenditure at the local scale, rather than improving regional governance (Bartaletti, 2015).

This chiefly budgetary concern is mirrored by the fact that the introduction of metropolitan cities neglected the territorial morphology of urban regions (Fedeli, 2017). The local government reform was also embedded in a constitutional reform that addressed several aspects of the republican institutional framework, including central–local relations (see Rotelli, 2017). As the constitutional reform was rejected in 2016, the local government reform ended up being incoherent not only with existing territorial morphologies, but also with emerging territorial institutional policies. Hence, the case of Italy provides another example of how constitutional politics is related with the territorial question (Keating & Laforest, 2018).

The relation between city-regional development and local institutional policies has been long debated by political scientists (Wood, 1958). After the 1990s, this relation was reformulated in the light of new geopolitical configurations and technological innovations (Scott, 2001). Currently, the social and political relevance of new city-regional scales is explored by

various strands of interdisciplinary research, which recently have been focusing on political-economic dynamics (d'Albergo et al., 2017) and citizenship (Lidström & Schaap, 2018).

In a European context characterised by “crisis-driven reforms” (Bolgherini, 2015) and “austerity urbanism” (Davies & Blanco, 2017), the agenda of metropolitan governance reforms may overlook other socially relevant goals, such as the regulation of territorial inequalities at the city-regional scale (see Sellers et al., 2017). For this reason, it is relevant to empirically explore the territorial effects of policy changes (see Artioli, 2016; Maggioni, 2016). Moreover, the consolidation of a “public policy perspective” (Goodwin, 2013) within the field of regional geography is necessary to assess emerging territorial divergences and disparities under new institutional conditions.

At the city-regional scale, a public policy perspective would allow for studying the governance and development of urban hinterlands. These territories are highly integrated in urban agglomerations from a socio-economic point of view but are scarcely or not at all integrated from a political-institutional point of view. Households and firms within these territories contribute to the production of urban externalities that determine the competitiveness of urban agglomerations in a global scenario but are not involved in the governance of such externalities (see Le Galès & Vitale, 2013).

However, analysing city-regional development from a public policy perspective requires a clear identification of the territorial units involved in policy change. Until recently, such assessment has been difficult, if not impossible, because of the lack of shared definitions and comparative data. Some recent research programmes carried out by international organisations have substantially contributed towards overcoming this obstacle, allowing comparative studies of city-regions. In particular, I refer to the definition of “metropolitan area” formulated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2012) and the definition of “labour market areas” (LMAs) harmonised by the EUROSTAT initiative (Coombes et al., 2012). This latter programme was led by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in collaboration with national statistical institutes and central statistical departments of several other European countries (ISTAT, 2015).

The concept of metropolitan area comes from the USA and implies a certain notion of spatial development and hinterland–core relationship (Martinotti, 1993), whereas the concept of labour market area connects with research on local economic systems in Europe (Crouch et al., 2001). Therefore, the statistical tools developed by the OECD and ISTAT are not exclusive; on the contrary, they provide analysts and policy-makers with the possibility to choose between two scientifically valid methodologies.

However, many scholars argue that concepts like “metropolitan area” or “labour market area” are unsatisfactory to account for contemporary urban geographical dynamics (Brenner & Schmid, 2014). These ontological disagreements are of particular relevance in the case of European urban regions where different territorial development patterns have begun to interact with one another, contributing to the aggregate performance of “polycentric urban regions” (Meijers et al., 2018). Hence, this paper elaborates a comparative and replicable method for identifying metropolitan territorial units beyond the traditional concepts of metropolitan area and labour market area.

The method presented herein can be applied in particular to the analysis of regional development in Europe. Since this method is built on statistical tools used by the European Commission (Dijkstra & Poelman, 2012) and EUROSTAT, comparisons will be easiest among member countries of these institutions. Nevertheless, this method could be applied in other countries provided that the geographical concepts of “metropolitan area” and “labour market area” are given a statistical definition based on associated datasets.

In contrast to other methodological reviews (cf. Parr, 2007), the method proposed herein mostly uses secondary data to identify urban territorial units. The originality of this method lies in the use of both quantitative and qualitative sources. Quantitative sources were online datasets (ISTAT, 2016; OECD, 2019), scientific papers (Calafati & Veneri, 2013) and web atlases (Atlas of Urban Expansion, 2016). Qualitative sources were geographical descriptions of metropolitan Milan (Bartaletti, 2009; Palermo, 1997). Both sets of data were georeferenced in a GIS and then analysed through visual examination. Primary data (i.e., raw census data) were retrieved from online census datasets (ISTAT, 2011a, 2011b) and institutional web pages (ISTAT, 2011c) and were analysed after the identification of the relevant territorial unit in order to describe some socio-economic trends.

The Milan urban region is a relevant case study because it has numerous historical experiences in metropolitan policy-making (Gualini, 2003) and specific social and political arrangements for urban development (Vicari & Molotch, 1990). Drawing on both statistical datasets and geographical descriptions, the present paper will propose a synthetic representation of the Milan metropolitan region. In this way, I intend to provide a methodological contribution to the current debates on the analysis of regional development in Italy (Balducci et al., 2017; Colleoni, 2016).

The next four sections illustrate the steps of the method proposed for identifying the Milan metropolitan region: (1) identification of the nodes, (2) assessment of the urban region on a vertical axis (as a region organised around one central locality), (3) assessment of the urban region on a horizontal axis (as a region of interdependent localities) and (4)

assessment of the region along a chronological axis (as a region evolving in time). The following section discusses the emerging relation between territorial dynamics and policy change. The last section concludes the paper and summarises the main findings.

## 2 | PRELIMINARY STEP: IDENTIFYING THE NODES

The first step for the empirical determination of an urban agglomeration is to identify the “central localities” that constitute the functional cores of the socio-economic-territorial organisation. This requires an understanding of the regional dynamics of socio-economic-territorial development. Also, this step allows neighbouring localities to be distinguished as separate nodes instead of as metropolitan expansions. This preliminary step is especially important for a city like Milan, which is embedded in a wide, interconnected and urbanised territory (Perulli, 2012). In this paper, northern Italy is conceived as a network (see Camagni & Salone, 1993), and only one “node” – that of Milan – is analysed.

To identify the relevant nodes of the network, I carried out an urban geographical analysis at the scale of northern Italy, including the administrative regions of Piemonte, Lombardia, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna and Liguria, in a GIS environment. I started by displaying some natural and artificial structural elements that connect the region as a whole. First, I identified the hydrographic and motorway networks. Cities are traditionally located at the intersections of these routes. Then, I added the layer of all municipalities in northern Italy above a given population threshold to display localities with “urban” characteristics. The population threshold of 100,000 residents proved to be interesting in that it displayed a relatively high number of localities that were enough to constitute a “network” and were mostly located along the hydrographic and motorway routes – the structuring lines of the region.

These localities have been growing and developing since pre-industrial times. Hence, this approximation of the urban network was not satisfactory for identifying the current nodes of city-regional development, and I added another layer. The geography of LMAs provided by ISTAT identifies functional areas based on the demand and supply of jobs and their “central locality.” In the case of LMAs at the scale of northern Italy, the threshold of 300,000 residents proved to be interesting because it displayed a range of large functional areas that accounted for various territorial development patterns present in the region (more “agglomerated” or more “diffused”). Those localities that possessed both the characteristics of “historical urban node” (i.e., municipalities above 100,000 residents) and of “large functional area” (i.e., LMAs above 300,000 residents) were selected as the *metropolitan nodes* of the northern Italy urban network (Figure 1).

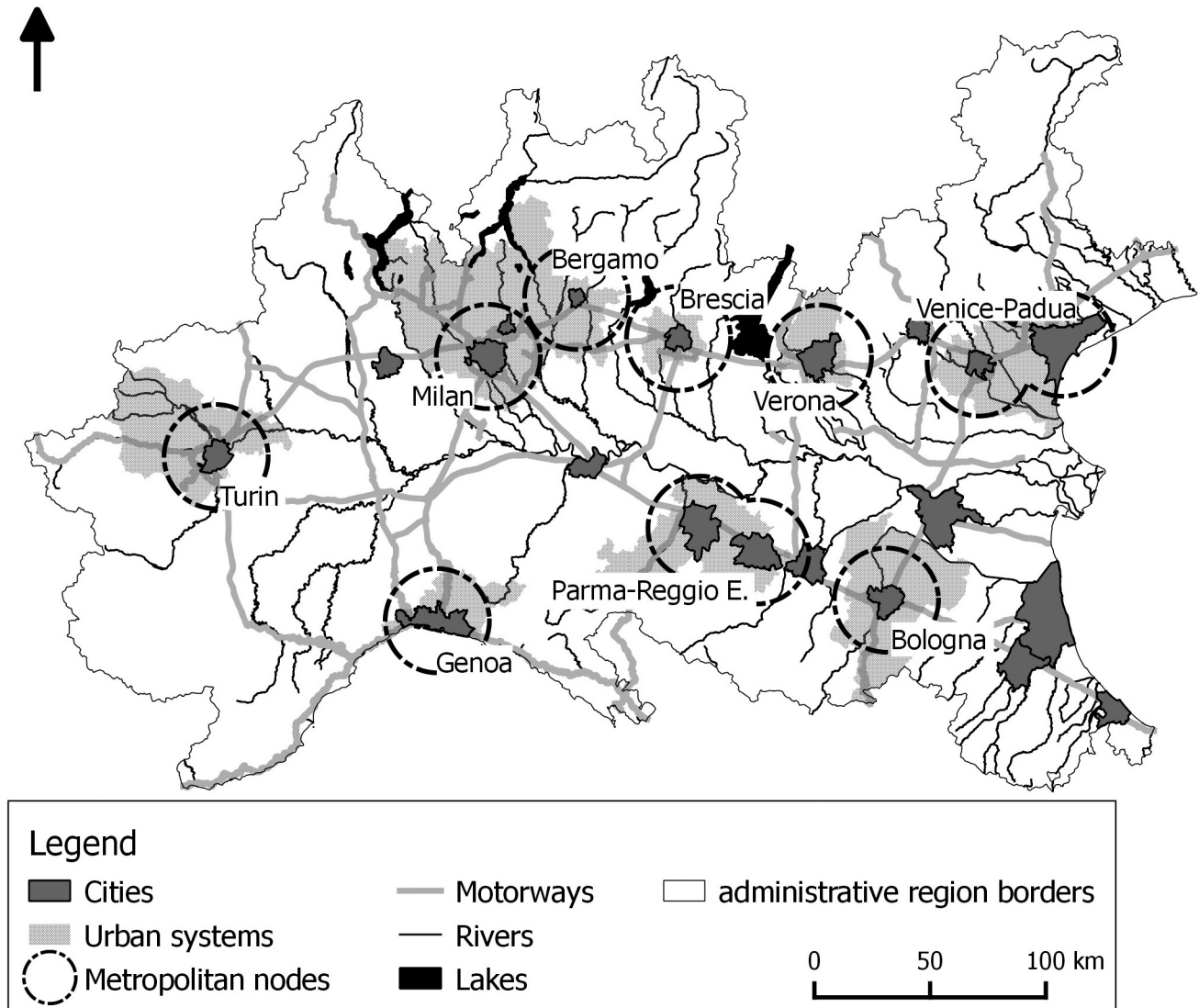
## 3 | FUNCTIONAL TERRITORIAL SCALES

The first axis on which I assessed the metropolitan node of Milan was a vertical one based on the concept of “functional territorial scale” (Calafati & Veneri, 2013). This conceptualisation of the urban phenomenon can be expressed as a mathematical function: as the physical distance from a central locality increases, the average degree of territorial integration with the locality decreases. At different distances from the central locality, it is possible to identify different functional territorial scales of growing size and population: city de facto, travel-to-work area, metropolitan area, city-region. Drawing on ongoing comparative research on the identification of urban areas, I was able to empirically identify the different functional territorial scales in the case of Milan (Figure 2).

At the travel-to-work functional scale, I drew on the geography of LMAs provided by ISTAT (see above). In the most recent update, which was applied to 2011 census data, ISTAT used a new algorithm to identify LMAs in order to enhance the harmonised definition of LMAs in Europe (Franconi et al., 2017).

At the metropolitan area functional scale, beyond the OECD definition (see above), I also looked at the definition provided by the German Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (the BBSR) (BBSR, 2011). Although this latter definition has the interesting characteristic of including metropolises from some countries that are important for shaping the European geographical space, such as Moscow and Istanbul, the OECD statistical datasets are more easily accessible and more widely used among European policy-makers (European Commission & UN-Habitat, 2016).

The concept of city de facto proposed by Calafati and Veneri (2013) is also connected to the OECD's approach. This concept identifies urban localities that are integrated to the central locality not only in relation with commuting patterns, but also in relation with a wider range of recursive socio-spatial practices that extend across different municipal jurisdictions.



**FIGURE 1** Metropolitan nodes of the northern Italy urban network, 2011. © Del Fabbro, Matteo 2019.

Sources: ISTAT, ISPRA, Regione Piemonte, Regione Liguria, Regione Lombardia, Regione del Veneto, OpenStreetMap contributors

To empirically identify the city-regional functional scale, I drew on the research of the Atlas of Urban Expansion coordinated at New York University (Angel et al., 2016). However, this empirical identification of the “city-region” is not fully satisfactory in the case of Milan because it does not address the question of how multiple urban territories are related to one another.

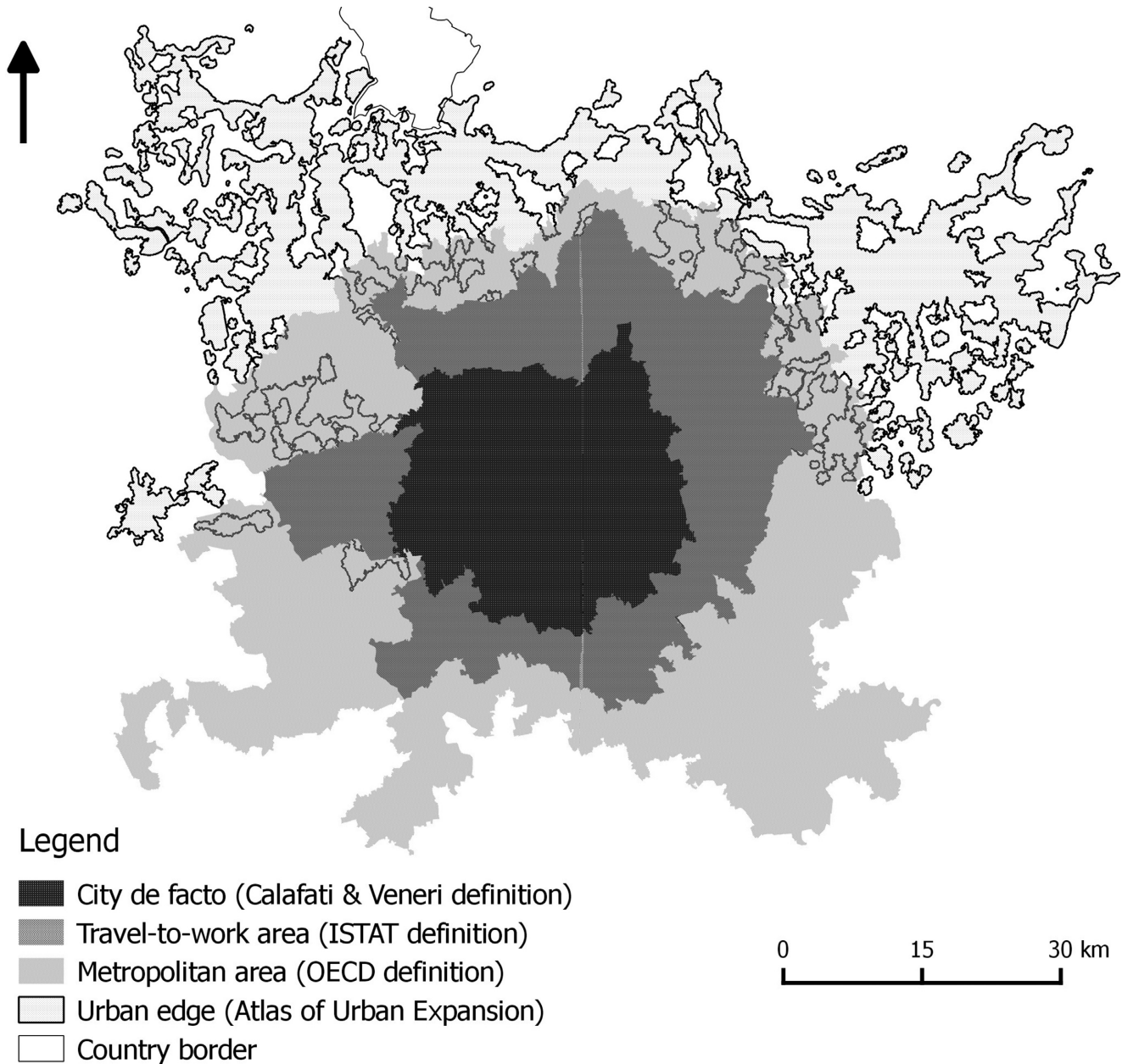
In fact, previous works on the Milan urban region highlighted its relatively uneven distribution of relational and built density (Lanzani, 2005). This issue will be addressed in the next section.

## 4 | INTERDEPENDENT TERRITORIAL SYSTEMS

The second axis on which I assessed the metropolitan node of Milan was a horizontal one based on the concept of “interdependent territorial systems.” I define these as different urban territories that are related to one another and thus form a “metropolitan region.” To identify these territories in the case of Milan, I started by examining two different geographical descriptions of metropolitan Milan.

First, I considered the research carried out by Bartaletti (2009), who uses the US standard metropolitan areas (SMAs) as a methodological reference. This procedure is based on the number of non-agricultural jobs to identify core cities and the “metropolitan nature” of an urban agglomeration. Then, three main criteria are applied to aggregate municipalities to the core city: (1) population increase, (2) population density and (3) built-up continuity. Commuting patterns are considered as





**FIGURE 2** Functional territorial scales of Milan. © Del Fabbro, Matteo 2019.

an additional criterion. Thirty-three metropolitan areas were identified across Italy, some of which were adjacent to one another and defined as aggregated metropolitan areas. Under this method, the “aggregated metropolitan area of Milan-Bergamo-Varese” was composed of five adjacent urban territories.

Another line of research developed by some scholars at the *Politecnico di Milano* (Polytechnic University of Milan) was based on an inductive methodology, beginning with the observation of urbanisation morphologies. The Milan urban region is interpreted as a set of “settlement patterns,” or loosely defined socio-spatial settings of interactions that display some peculiar features over time. According to this line of research, the “Milan urban region” is composed of nine different urban territories (Palermo, 1997).

Both of these geographical descriptions include Bergamo and its territory; however, they do not describe how this territory is integrated within metropolitan Milan. In fact, it should be stressed that the physical proximity of two urban territories does not necessarily entail territorial integration. Moreover, as I have previously shown, the locality of Bergamo is developed such that it constitutes a distinct “metropolitan node” of the northern Italy urban network. Hence, I argue that the locality of Bergamo should be excluded from the identification of metropolitan Milan.

This argument is supported by additional indicators of territorial interdependence that mark a stronger political and economic autonomy of Bergamo in comparison to other neighbouring urban territories with similar geographical characteristics. For instance, a public university was established in Bergamo in the 1960s, yet a (joint) public university was not established in Como and Varese until the 1990s. Also, the functional area of Bergamo is less dependent on Milan for the supply of jobs (Table 1).

To select the localities to be included in the definition of metropolitan Milan, I drew on the two different geographical descriptions presented above. Although the territorial sub-divisions of the “metropolitan area” of Bartaletti (2009) differ greatly from those of the “urban region” of Palermo (1997) and Lanzani (2005), the localities taken into account by the two approaches substantially coincide. There are only two relevant divergences that can be settled with the aid of a third, independent point of view. These regard the inclusion or exclusion of the towns of Crema and Vigevano.

The geographies of the LMAs elaborated by ISTAT for 2001 and 2011 show that Crema does not have relevant interactions with any other locality included in metropolitan Milan. On the other hand, they show that Vigevano has strong interactions with Abbiategrasso, which is included in metropolitan Milan. Hence, I included the latter locality and excluded the former. The last step in providing a synthetic representation of Milan at the city-regional functional scale (i.e., the Milan metropolitan region) was the selection of the LMAs that included most of the localities (cities, towns and suburban territories) identified in my literature review (Figure 3).

## 5 | CITY-REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The third axis on which I assessed the metropolitan node of Milan was a chronological one. The 2011 LMA dataset released by ISTAT shows a clear trend of growing territorial integration. For example, 16 LMAs were found within the Milan metropolitan region in 2001, but this number reduced to eight by 2011. The socio-economic-territorial dynamic has resulted in a simpler but persistent city-regional polycentrism, which calls for the reinforced role of medium and small cities in the spatial and economic organisation of a metropolitan region.

However, the aggregate data also reveal some emerging territorial imbalances. In fact, the population growth rate outpaced the employment growth rate, which suggests that the Milan metropolitan region has been attracting new residents from outside, yet job creation has not kept pace with population increase. The remarkable increase in the resident population can be attributed to internal migratory flows from “losing” Italian territories that have been negatively affected by globalisation and the 2008 economic crisis. Furthermore, the development trends *within* the metropolitan region are uneven, as the functional metropolitan core displays a better performance in terms of job supply than the overall city-region (Table 2).

## 6 | INSIGHTS FOR METROPOLITAN INSTITUTIONAL POLICY

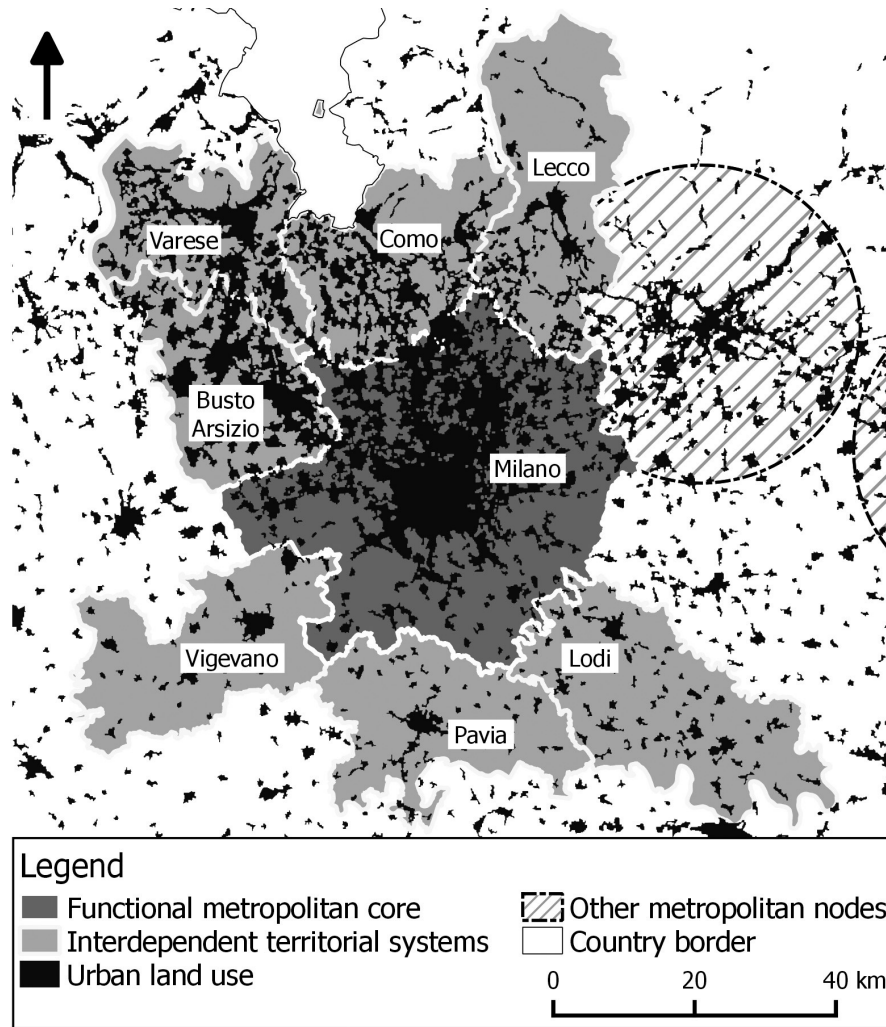
The territorial units and dynamics identified herein contrast with the administrative jurisdictions of the local government reform in a number of ways. In light of the public policy perspective adopted in this paper, the assessment of these discrepancies is important because it can reveal the emerging territorial effects of local institutional policies in the Milan metropolitan region.

No administrative jurisdiction corresponds with the “city de facto,” as the municipality of Milan is too small, yet the metropolitan city of Milan is too large. Also, no administrative jurisdiction exists with respect to the “travel-to-work area” because the metropolitan city of Milan includes some towns that are not included in this functional scale, yet excludes other

**TABLE 1** Employment-to-population ratio of labour market areas adjacent to Milan

Functional area	Distance of the central locality from Milan (Duomo) by car		Employment/residents ratio (2011)	Variation (2001–2011)
	km	min		
Bergamo	52	57	0.41	−0.024
Lecco	54	52	0.38	−0.032
Como	54	55	0.36	−0.052
Varese	59	66	0.35	−0.033

Source: Own calculations on ISTAT data (XV censimento popolazione, VIII and IX censimento industria e servizi); OpenStreetMap



**FIGURE 3** The Milan metropolitan region, 2011. © Del Fabbro, Matteo 2019.

Sources: ISTAT, Corine Land Cover

towns and territories that are included in it. Finally, no administrative jurisdiction corresponds with the “metropolitan area,” because the metropolitan city of Milan is too small.

The Milan metropolitan region is composed of different urban territories identified in the literature as “local systems” or “settlement patterns.” As demonstrated elsewhere (Del Fabbro, 2017), the territories of Brianza and Busto Arsizio are the only ones that clearly represent “urban geographical systems” of the Milan metropolitan region according to a wide acceptance in the scientific community. The Legnano-Busto Arsizio-Gallarate conurbation has developed since the late 19th century through the physical merging of several smaller centres. When the province of Varese was created in 1927, this urban territory was split between two provincial jurisdictions. The recent local government reform has not changed this situation and has simply implemented new jurisdictional boundaries that overlapped existing provincial jurisdictions. The region of Brianza, which has been historically characterised by its economic specialisation in the furniture industry, obtained political autonomy in 2009 and separated from the province of Milan. However, the most recent territorial development trends show that this territory has been integrated into the functional metropolitan core and has hence lost its territorial autonomy.

The Milan metropolitan region, as identified in this paper, is contained in the administrative jurisdiction of Lombardy. However, the administrative jurisdiction of Lombardy includes many different geographical systems: not all of them are urban, and among the urban ones, not all are integrated in the Milan metropolitan region. Thus, the intuitive claim that Lombardy – in its current administrative configuration – can assume the role of governing authority of the Milan metropolitan region is untenable because the administrative jurisdiction of Lombardy does not correspond with a functionally integrated territory (see Ostrom et al., 1961). In other words, the Milan metropolitan region and the administrative region of Lombardy, as of the early 21st century, belong to different *geographical scales*.

**TABLE 2** Employment and demographic trends of the Milan metropolitan region, 2001–2011

	2001		2011		Variation (%)	
	Residents	Employees	Residents	Employees	Residents	Employees
Milan city-region						
City-region	5,757,278	2,596,906	6,085,548	2,661,545	5.7	2.49
Functional metropolitan core	3,628,848	1,770,827	3,685,101	1,815,830	1.55	2.54
Italian macro-regions (NUTS-1)						
North-western Italy	14,938,562	6,147,598	15,765,567	6,251,064	5.54	1.68
North-eastern Italy	10,652,177	4,553,116	11,447,805	4,643,780	7.47	1.99
Central Italy	10,889,269	3,982,674	11,600,675	4,188,603	6.53	5.17
Southern Italy	13,914,865	3,262,147	13,977,431	3,316,314	0.45	1.66

NUTS, nomenclature des unités territoriales statistiques.

Source: Own elaboration on ISTAT data (XV censimento popolazione, VIII and IX censimento industria e servizi)

## 7 | CONCLUSION

Regional governance reforms were high on the governmental agenda after the emergence of the recent economic and financial crisis. Goals previously associated with regional governance reforms, such as the improvement of regional economic development and the democratisation of local public administrations, were mostly replaced by the objective of reducing public expenditure at the local scale and were thus coherent with austerity policies. The paper has examined one main issue raised by the implementation of regional governance reforms in such a context: the relation between territorial dynamics and policy change. The case of Milan is relevant for addressing this issue because several long-lasting efforts in this region have aimed to build metropolitan institutions and locally specific modes of urban governance.

Drawing on existing geographical descriptions of metropolitan Milan, this paper integrated a qualitative dataset of localities defined as forming part of the city-region of Milan and relevant territorial statistical information produced and used by EU institutions such as the European Commission and EUROSTAT. The Milan metropolitan region is thus synthetically represented as a territory composed of one functional metropolitan core and seven interdependent territorial systems, with a total population of about six million and about 2.6 million jobs. Through analysing economic and demographic measures of these territorial units at different points in time, this paper highlighted how the city-regional development of Milan is dependent on other Italian regions for the supply of labour force and on urban territories outside the metropolitan core for housing supply. Finally, this paper found that it would be an analytical mistake to criticise the recent metropolitan institutional reform on the grounds that the administrative region of Lombardy can act as the governing body of the Milan metropolitan region.

Milan does not represent a unique case in Europe insofar as numerous urban regions may be characterised by multiple territorial development patterns that have begun to interact with one another. I will thus conclude by providing some instances in which the method presented herein can be applied to other urban regions.

The three-axis method described herein could be applied to British city-regions. The geographical dataset used by the British Office for National Statistics to designate “travel-to-work areas” has many points in common with the LMA tool promoted by EUROSTAT. My preliminary analysis has singled out the Birmingham city-region as a comparable case because of its hybrid spatial structure and its prominent position in British intellectual tradition.

In continental Europe, the available comparative data on metropolitan areas (BBSR and OECD) show that the Frankfurt/Rhein-Main and Brussels urban regions combine two different patterns of urbanisation (a large dominant core and a polycentric urban network) and may be thus studied through the three-axis method proposed herein.

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