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Governance in the metropolitan area of Valencia (Spain): an unfinished business

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Metropolitan government is still an unfinished business in Spain. An example of this is the metropolitan area of Valencia. The aim of this article is to learn about the process that has led to the current situation of a lack of metropolitan government and to propose actions that will help to make it a reality in the not-too-distant future. To this end, it analyses the history and the current regulations, and it is completed with the opinions and contributions of academics and politicians. The result is that, although there is no political will to include the consolidation of a metropolitan government in Valencia in the current political agenda, it is possible to set in motion initiatives of different types, on the part of local administrations and civil society, which can take advantage of the existing governance structures to advance toward a metropolitan government in the medium term.

KEYWORDS

València Metropolitan Area, metropolitan governance, local policy, urban region, governance structures

1. Introduction

The Valencian Community is one of the autonomous regions of Spain. It currently has a population of 5,106,228 inhabitants. The Valencian economy has diverged from other more prosperous Spanish territories and GDP per capita is 12 points below the national average. The current unemployment rate stands at 13.5% and GDP per capita is 20,792 euros.

In the Valencian Community (NUTS 2) there are nine metropolitan realities according to the Eurostat-INE classification. The three biggest metropolitan realities are: the Metropolitan Area of Valencia, a mature and consolidated metropolitan area, the third largest in Spain, made up of 65 municipalities and around 1.8 million inhabitants; the Alacant-Elx Metropolitan Area, made up of 19 municipalities with a total of around 850,000 inhabitants; and the Metropolitan Area of Castelló, which covers some 20 municipalities and almost 400,000 inhabitants.

The processes occurring in metropolitan areas in the Valencian Community are part of the dynamics of urbanization and industrialization that are at the basis of the formation of the so-called "real city" in the more developed countries as a whole. However, it is necessary to begin by pointing out the non-existence of a political agenda to address the governance of metropolitan areas in the area. It clearly does not correspond to the social and demographic reality, which goes far beyond municipal boundaries, as a consequence of the great phase of residential dispersion and economic activities in increasingly extensive territories in Spain and Europe (Nel·lo, 1996).

According to Romero (2017) the spanish context of metropolitan governance can be explained through its 1978 Constitution, which entailed a profound modification of the territorial organization of the state. It followed a federal-state inspiration, creating a new pillar of political power, the autonomous communities. In this framework the competences in territorial planning are the responsibility of the autonomous communities, not of the central government. The only territorial policies maintained by the central government are major infrastructures. This is why the Spanish legislative context allows the autonomous communities to promote the design of forms of metropolitan governance.

In the European context, the development of metropolitan governance is not related to the state model, centralized or federal, but to the political will of the actors concerned. Thus, centralized states such as France and Portugal have made a great impulse of metropolitan policies, and federal states, such as Germany, have also done so. The Spanish case is different, since although regional parliaments can promote and approve these policies, they have not done so. Barcelona is the only city where successful metropolitan policies have been implemented. In the rest of cities this impulse has not taken place. This singularity distances us from the dynamics of Western Europe (Tomàs, 2023).

The case analyzed here, the Metropolitan Area of Valencia, is an example of how urban processes have gone beyond the local administrative reality, without this having meant an impulse to develop forms of governance or democratic conversation in this respect.

This article analyses the process of urbanization in the region, the territorial organization, the different proposals and cooperation instruments at the sub-regional level and the territorial planning process in the autonomous region. The main focus is the study of the current situation of governance in the metropolitan area of Valencia. To complete the policy and legislative analysis, a qualitative methodology is used, based on interviews with qualified informants, both academic and political, whose contributions help to understand what the problems and challenges are for the future. Finally, some general recommendations and conclusions are made.

2. Materials and methods

The aim of this article is to expose the current situation of governance, or non-governance, in the metropolitan area of Valencia, and to reflect on the political and social consequences that this situation entails for both institutions and citizens. The academic view can contribute to drawing attention to the dysfunction between real life and the administrative organizational structure of a complex territory such as the metropolitan area of the third largest city in Spain.

For the elaboration of this research, a relevant and updated bibliography, both national and international, has been used, whose critical analysis contributes to disseminating a specific reality in other territorial spheres. In addition, the basic statistical sources provided by the National Institute of Statistics of Spain (INE) and Eurostat have been used in order to incorporate the most relevant data. From this information, we add a quantitative view of the metropolitan reality. As the main contribution to the subject, the

most relevant data comes from personal interviews with experts in metropolitan governance and politicians. Six experts were interviewed, both academic and high commissioners, at national and international level. The other six interviews were conducted with political actors of all ideologies, with representation in regional and local government. The interviews have two purposes, firstly, to obtain a global view of the people involved in the management of territorial policies and, secondly, regarding politics, to know in depth the reasons that explain why the metropolitan agenda hasn't been achieved. This qualitative view, has served to corroborate and detail the results obtained from the bibliographical analysis and existing legislation.

The interviews were conducted personally with the politicians and by writing with the experts. The questions raised were the same for both groups. Specifically, the questions were these ones:

- What is your general assessment of metropolitan governance?
- What are the factors that, according to you, would facilitate metropolitan governance?
- What are the factors that, in your opinion, hinder metropolitan governance?
- What are, in your opinion, the future challenges of metropolitan governance in your management area?

It is necessary to highlight that politicians preferred to remain anonymous. This issue explains why their answers are treated in common and there are not specific references to people.

The combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, i.e., triangulation, consolidates the results.

3. Results

Results are presented following the most suitable structure, regarding the knowledge of authors, to understand the processes analyzed. First of all, results focus on the area of the Valencian Community. For this area, the process of the urbanization from the 1950s onwards is explained using the main social and economic factors. It is followed by the current territorial organization and the spatial planning process. Secondly, the results are focused on the València Metropolitan Area. For this space, the urban sprawl process is the main one analyzed, as well as its environmental, social and economic consequences. After that, some of the delimitations of the metropolitan area are presented in order to understand the differences and criteria. Finally, an evaluation of the metropolitan governance, in which interview results are included, forms an interesting part of the study.

3.1. Context of the Valencian Community

3.1.1. The process of urbanization in the Valencian Community

The contemporary beginning of the urbanization process in Spanish urban areas, and also in the Valencian region, can be dated back to the 1950s and 1960s, when a phenomenon of massive emigration to the cities from rural areas began. The process known as "rural exodus" was initiated with the approval of the National

Stabilization Plan in 1959 which, together with the reopening of borders, allowed Spain to enter the market economy (Serrano Lara, 2018).

The 1960s was a key period in which industry in Valencia led the process of territorial diffusion and decentralization of production facilities, which was partly responsible for the increase in inter-municipal labor flows (Albertos et al., 2007). Tourist activity in the area focused on the supply of second homes, as opposed to hotel development (Obiol and Pitarch, 2011). This residential tourism implied an enormous consumption of land resources, mainly in coastal areas, linked to the developed "sun, sea and sand" tourism model. It was not only tourism that was the reason of the high land consumption, but also the phenomenon of secondary housing, where residencies were located in low-density developments or dispersed throughout the territory.

The beginning of the 1980s saw the stagnation of large migrations, bringing the rural exodus to an end (Serrano Lara, 2018).

One of the issues of interest is that in many cities the population has remained stable since the beginning of the 1990s, but the expansion of the urban fabric has not stopped. Among other causes, it is noted that the need for housing continues to grow due to the change in population structure and the general decrease in the size of households. The speculative processes in which urban property has been immersed are a key variable in understanding the evolution of urbanization.

The first real estate bubble (1987–1992) strongly affected housing prices, and the second (1997–2007), in addition to raising prices, generated large amounts of urban land, with an increase in artificial land in the Valencian region much higher than the average for Spain and Europe (Zornoza-Gallego, 2014).

There are currently nine functional urban areas in the Valencia Region (Figure 1). The capitals of the three Valencian provinces make up large functional areas, with Valencia (1,766,401 inhabitants) standing out, which has also experienced the largest population increase in the period 1996–2021 (320,442 people). Despite the large concentration of population and activity on the coast, it is considered that the urban space in the region is distributed polycentrically.

3.1.2. Territorial organization and its government

The current territorial organization in the Valencian Community is a product of the Statute of Autonomy, approved in 1982 and reformed in 2006. The local corporations or municipalities are the basic local autonomous body. The provincial councils are recognized as an expression of provincial autonomy and must act, according to the Statute, as institutions of the *Generalitat Valenciana* (the regional autonomous government).

The intermediate level between the province and the municipality, i.e., the *comarca*, is included in the basic Valencian law. Article 65 of the Statute states that the *Corts Valencianes* (Valencian parliament) can pass a law to determine the county division, after consulting the local entities concerned. The law has not been developed, so the *comarcas* are a statistical division without an administrative entity. At present, the Valencian Community is divided into 34 comarcas, 542 municipalities and 3 provinces (NUTS 3).

FIGURE 1
Functional urban areas in the Valencian Community according to Eurostat-INE. Source: Own elaboration based on INE data.

Another intermediate entity between the province and the municipality is the *mancomunidad*. Law 21/2018, of 16 October, of the Generalitat, on Community Associations of the Valencian Community, defines them as "voluntary associations of municipalities that are constituted to manage or execute plans, carry out projects and works or provide services of their competence to the citizens, bringing the administration closer to them and promoting a sustainable, balanced and egalitarian social and economic development of these municipalities and their respective territories." This law was intended to be a response to regionalisation, since more than half of the existing *mancomunidades* (52) coincide with subregional boundaries of the *comarcas*.

In addition to the commented *mancomunidades* or *comarcas*, in the aforementioned law on local government of the Valencian Community there are other legal concepts for local cooperation, including consortiums. Consortia can be set up between municipalities, even if they do not belong to the same province or autonomous community. The most widespread are the so-called *pactes territorials* or "territorial agreements for employment." These agreements between municipalities are a respond to the drive of *Labora*, the *Servei Valencià d'Ocupació i Formació* (Valencian Employment and Training Service), as part of its strategy for job creation from 2019. There are six consortiums in Alacant, nine in Castelló and ten in the province of Valencia.

In short, the region of Valencia is dragging along inertia from the past that slows down the rationalization of its territorial structure, which would enable more democratic

government action, a more equitable territorial strategy and greater sustainability of development in response to the current socio-economic reality.

3.1.3. The spatial planning process

The Statute of Autonomy states that the *Generalitat* has exclusive powers in matters of territorial and coastal planning, town planning, housing and other matters affected by the Territorial Strategy of the Valencian Community (ETCV) (Conselleria de Medi Ambient, 2011).

This plan was approved by the regional government on 13 January 2011 and its main objective is to define a territorial model for the Valencian Community with the greatest possible consensus among the social agents of the territory. It also proposes a supra-municipal territorial strategy that enhances the achievement of the maximum efficiency in the execution of plans, programmes and projects at the intermediate scale, between the municipality and the autonomous community. The ETCV presents 25 objectives, 100 goals and more than 1,500 projects. The guidelines of the ETCV must be taken into account by municipalities and provinces in the implementation of facilities and services, which overcomes, to a large extent, the rigidity of the territorial structure of the Administration.

Law 5/2014, of 25 July, of the *Generalitat*, on Spatial Planning, Urban Planning and Landscape, replaced and repealed all previous laws. This law on spatial planning, urban planning and landscape was based on the ETCV developed in 2011, as well as on the European Territorial Strategy, the European Territorial Agenda and the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion, which have led to the European Strategy 2020. The law provided a comprehensive treatment of the territory, seeking an appropriate balance between all spatial scales of planning and it is, as stated in its introduction, "a mechanism for the preparation and evaluation of the plan where environmental, territorial, landscape, economic and social aspects converge on the same plane, contributing to a more efficient vision of planning." The law regulated all territorial management instruments, which facilitates the management of environmental and territorial aspects in a more efficient way than with the previous dispersion of instruments. This law was revised recently, in the Legislative Decree 1/2021, of June 18, of the *Consell,* where the text includes different norms that modified the Law and inclusive language.

Under the ETCV, territorial action plans have been developed, which can be of a sectoral or comprehensive nature, depending on their purpose. Since the approval of the ETCV in 2011, several comprehensive plans have been developed, including those for Comarques Centrals, Vega Baixa, Alacant and Elx, Castelló, L'Horta de València, Metropolità de València and Racó d'Ademuz.

Among the plans of a sectoral nature, the revision of the Sectoral Territorial Action Plan on Flood Risk Prevention in the Valencia Region (Consellería d'Habitatge, 2015), the Territorial Action Plan for the Coastal Green Infrastructure of the Valencia Region (Conselleria de Vivienda, Obras Públicas y Vertebración del territorio, 2018) stand out.

Finally, among the comprehensive territorial action plans, special attention should be paid to those of the three capital cities,

which were developed in 2016 by Conselleria de Política Territorial, Obres Públiques i Mobilitat (2016). Their main objective is the definition and characterization of the green infrastructure of the territory for conservation purposes, guaranteeing the territorial and biological connections that allow the conservation of ecological processes.

The València Metropolitan Territorial Action Plan covers an area of 90 municipalities and its population is ∼1,800,000 inhabitants. This Plan considers it essential to connect *l'Horta* with the rest of the metropolitan territory. The space called l'Horta is an irrigated farmland area, with an enormous agricultural, historical, and cultural value in Valencia. Spaces like this are seen as the most distinctive traditional agricultural systems in Europe located around cities (Meeus, 1995; Melo, 2020). Since 2020 it has been declared a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System by the FAO. L'Horta already has a territorial action plan and a law (Law 5/2018, of 6 March, of the *Generalitat Valenciana*) to be protected. In addition, a catalog of landscapes of the metropolitan area was incorporated to zone the undeveloped land and identify all the landscape resources on a supralocal scale. There are also some other instruments, including strategic plans, landscape programmes and the mobility law.

Besides the plans and programmes, whether or not they are included by law, multiple strategic documents have been developed in the Valencian Community that should serve as guidelines for public policies, although their success and progress have been discreet. At present, municipal strategic plans are being drawn up in different formats, such as the Valencian Urban Agenda, launched by agreement of the Council on 18 October 2019. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down, and even reformulated, the process of participation and preparation of this Agenda. Some cities, such as València, have also promoted their Urban Agenda.

In short, in the Valencian Community there are many powerful instruments for land management and planning that avoid problems of unsustainability and abuses. Most of the plans and regulations have been approved fairly recently, mostly since 2016, with the change of administration after 20 years of conservative governments (1995–2015). The multiple regulations and plans, both existing and repealed, together with the judicialization of some of the proposals, make territorial management complex, which also conceals conflicting feelings and territorial identities that are experienced as threatened. One of the most apparently powerful instruments are the Territorial Action Plans; however, either because they have only recently been drawn up or because they break with the inertias of the past—such as the idea of territory as a set of municipalities that compete (not collaborate)—the reality is that these instruments require a better territorial culture to overcome the localisms and partisanship that are still in force.

3.2. The case of the València Metropolitan Area (VMA)

3.2.1. Urban development in the metropolitan area

The evolution of the population in the VMA, as well as the processes of residential and economic activity dispersion in an

increasingly extensive urban area, basically responds to what has happened in the largest Spanish metropolitan areas (Nel·lo, 2017). The causes of the dispersion processes, which accelerated from the 1980s onwards, continued until the bursting of the speculative bubble in 2008.

The factors explaining the urban sprawl since the second half of the 1980s can be summarized as follows:

a) Changes in the production process due to the globalization process (diffuse specialization and fragmentation in the "value-added chain," changes in the conditions for economies of scale)
b) Transformations in everyday life associated with social and cultural change, leisure and consumption patterns and the organization of work
c) Diversification of household income levels, which made it possible for a significant part of the middle classes, especially young couples, to move from the center to the periphery in search of a better quality of life
d) Extension of services and facilities throughout the territory thanks to the efforts of the public authorities, which gave a major boost to the extension of the welfare state, especially in health and education in the compulsory sector
e) The role of major communication infrastructures, also the result of major public investment programmes by the central, regional and local governments, which gradually made it possible to combine residence in the metropolitan areas with daily commuting to the central city for work, studies, shopping and leisure in isochrones of no more than 40 min

The environmental, social and economic consequences and implications of the urban sprawl process in the territory are also well-known and, basically, similar to what has happened in other metropolitan areas. They can be summarized as follows:

a) Exacerbation of mobility and air pollution:

- Work, study, leisure, shopping, production and services
- Promotion of the use of private vehicles
- Congestion, air pollution and increased accident rates
- Increased ecological footprint: consumption of energy, water and raw materials, production of waste

b) Increasing land consumption, territorial disorder and fragmentation, and growing environmental problems:

- Doubling of land demand for residential, tertiary sector and industrial uses and infrastructure development
- Processes of fracking, environmental degradation, trivialization or destruction of cultural landscapes
- An unsustainable, "imported" model, as in many other European Mediterranean territories, far from the compact and diverse Mediterranean city model, but, nevertheless, demanded by some population groups

c) Increased processes of residential and social segregation, accentuating the differentiation between municipalities in the

same metropolitan area. Several factors are at the basis of the explanation: changes in the property market; an increase in immigration (1998–2008); the tendency of more affluent social groups to leave urban centers or to occupy them, expelling residents and increasing the processes of gentrification or "touristification"; cultural fragmentation and fragmentation of living habits and conditions; phenomena of segregated reproduction, especially in education; new commercial geography that encourages the private car; and the aspiration of social groups with higher income levels to live in closed communities with the well-known risks of "insularisation" and "cultural separatism."

d) Inadequacy of the administrative structure because of the existing distance between sectoral plans and increasingly integrated functional realities, without real coordination in many cases by the public authorities concerned, and also because of the growing difficulties in the design and implementation of public policies on a metropolitan scale.
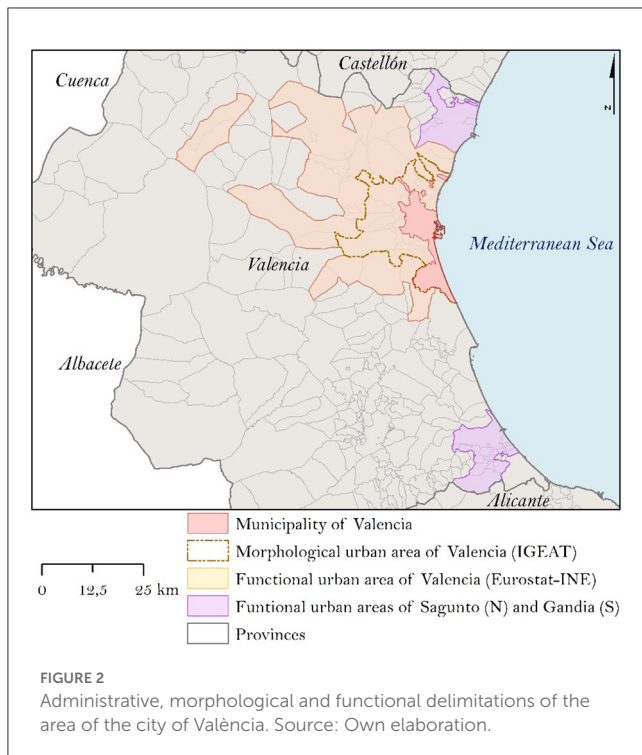
3.2.2. Metropolitan delimitations

In the Valencian region there are no official metropolitan areas approved by the administration, so there are none in the city of Valencia either. The *Corporación Administrativa Gran València* (General Council of Gran València), born in the post-war period after the approval of the first regional development plan (1946), coordinated the area in a supra-municipal way for almost 40 years. It was one of the most important metropolitan entities in the history of Spanish urban planning (Selva-Royo, 2015).

This institution drew up the first metropolitan regulatory document, the General Urban Development Plan for Valencia and its surrounding area, which covered 28 municipalities. During its operation, many plans were approved and their regulations are reflected in the city nowadays. The existence of this plan shows the importance given in the early days of metropolisation to the joint management of the territory. In October 1982, the General Council of Gran València decided to give back to the municipalities their urban planning competences (Burriel, 2009a). *Gran València* became extinct in 1986, being the longest-lived metropolitan entity in Spain.

After the extinction of the *Gran València*, the Generalitat Valenciana created the *Consell Metropolità de l'Horta (CMH)* (Metropolitan Council of L'Horta) in 1986 to respond to urban planning needs. In 1988, a new supra-municipal regulatory framework was approved, coordinating municipal development plans with existing sectoral policies. According to Burriel (2009b), a territorial model for the metropolitan area as a whole was not established, because it was met with a strong municipal rejection of the newly recovered competences.

One of the most controversial issues for metropolitan areas is their delimitation, which is based on the historical evolution of cities and how structures have changed in relation to mobility.

As an example of this, Figure 2 is presented. It shows four delimitations that can be related to different urban realities in a territory with 2.6 million inhabitants on a provincial scale. The first of these, the municipality of València is the

Administrative, morphological and functional delimitations of the area of the city of València. Source: Own elaboration.

central area and where the largest population in the area is located (789,744 inhabitants).e Municipalities are the basic administrative units that are delimited based on historical criteria. The growth of current urban spaces, together with the enormous development of mobility, the needs of economic actors and the existence of processes associated with environmental and social changes, make them an obsolete unit for managing city services (energy transition, public transport, land use planning, labor market, housing,…).

The second delimitation, the morphological urban area delimited by the IGEAT, is outlined, made up of 39 municipalities, with a total of 1,509,656 inhabitants. It follows a morphological criterion of minimum population density, which delimits the first metropolitan ring.

In third delimitation, we find the functional urban area (Eurostat-INE), where a total of 1,766,401 people live and which is made up of 65 municipalities. Although it is a much larger area than the morphological one, the difference in population between the two is small. The functional criterion is the one used to recognize the socio-economic relations in an area and is considered the most appropriate for understanding the dynamics of urban areas.

Finally, the area corresponding to the province is much larger than all the previous ones and, within it, there are two more functional urban areas within the province: Sagunt and Gandia.

So far, beyond academic efforts or those of the administrations themselves to propose an official delimitation of the urban and metropolitan region, there is no political will to incorporate the metropolitan reality and the challenges of governing the "real city" into the agenda of the political actors concerned.

3.2.3. Metropolitan governance from political context and document analysis

The metropolitan area of Valencia is composed of its morphological urban area (first ring), made up of 39 municipalities and slightly more than 1.5 million inhabitants, and its functional urban area (second metropolitan ring), made up of 65 municipalities and almost 1.8 million inhabitants. Some classifications include a number close to 90 functionally linked municipalities, comprising almost 2 million inhabitants. It is a mature metropolitan reality, a "real city" of almost two million inhabitants, the third largest in Spain, similar in size to those of other European regions, but with marked differences in the way they tackle the challenges they face.

For decades, numerous studies and reports have alluded to the absence of metropolitan governance mechanisms and their costs (Sorribes, 1999; Sorribes and Romero, 2001; Boix and Veneri, 2008; Romero, 2009; Romero and Farinós, 2011; Pitarch, 2017; Baron and Romero, 2018; Romero et al., 2018; Salom, 2020). The truth is that, in the Valencian case, the democratic conversation between political actors on the metropolitan agenda is at a very early stage. It could be said that since the achievement of the autonomous state there has been only discreet progress, limited to the joint management of waste, the integral water cycle and mobility. Regardless of the composition of governments and the political cycle, one could even speak of a lack of political will and metropolitan culture and, also, of a certain collective failure and of the "resignation" of the political actors concerned when it comes to promoting a coherent and consistent metropolitan agenda (Sorribes, 2022). There were political decisions that even meant a setback in the agenda, such as the case of the dissolution of the *Consell Metropolità de l'Horta* by the regional government itself through Law 8/1999, of 3 December, which abolished the Metropolitan Area of *l'Horta*.

The dissolution occurred at a time when the important process of urban dispersion had already taken place and when the metropolitan agenda was most needed. It was a political decision whose fundamental causes can be summarized as follows:

a) Need for self-assertion of the regional government and reluctance to create a new political actor with wide-ranging capacities

b) Distrust and resistance from local governments, especially in the medium-sized cities that make up the metropolitan area, due to the risk of losing competences

c) Lack of leadership from the central city itself and from the regional government

d) Lack of genuine interest among political actors (political parties with parliamentary and local government representation, both in government and in opposition in each case), as well as economic and social actors, in placing the metropolitan issue on the political agenda

Another political decision was the approval in 2001 of a law on the creation and management of metropolitan areas in the Valencian Community, which was amended in 2004 and repealed in 2010. It was never developed, but transitory provisions were used to the (re)creation in the VMA of a Metropolitan Entity for Hydraulic

Services (made up of 51 municipalities) and the Metropolitan Entity for the Treatment of Waste (45 municipalities).[1]

The change of political cycle that occurred after the 2015 regional and local elections could have been the great opportunity to push forward the metropolitan agenda. The regional government was formed by a coalition of left-wing parties (PSPV-PSOE, Coalició Compromís and Unides Podem) through government agreements that have been maintained since then. Furthermore, local governments are formed, for the most part, by left-wing coalitions in practically the entire Metropolitan Area of Valencia. It should be added that the central government has also been made up of left-wing parties since June 2018.

However, although the Statute of Autonomy enables content to be given on a metropolitan scale, not only through coordination and cooperation in sectoral matters, but even through the approval of metropolitan laws, this issue has not so far been on the political agenda in the above-mentioned period. After this time, there are no reasons to believe that significant changes are in the offing. Even in the more modest sphere of supramunicipal sectoral plans, it is premature to pass judgement on the initiatives promoted during the first legislature but not yet concluded.

Today, the fears of having opted for metropolitan spatial plans instead of promoting metropolitan strategic plans have been confirmed. In any case, metropolitan spatial plans have been elaborated but not approved and some recent initiatives to deal with the effects of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine relax or very generous interpret the existing territorial and environmental regulations.

After almost two legislatures in which the left-wing coalition governments have been hegemonic, both in the regional government and in almost all the local governments of the metropolitan area, it can be said that the democratic conversation on metropolitan areas in the political sphere has not really begun. The very discreet progress has been limited to some sectoral initiatives of the regional government and some exceptional projects promoted by local governments.

The causes that explain this lack of institutional dialogue are very diverse: institutional fragmentation, lack of leadership, resistance to creating new spaces that could complicate the already complex presence in the territory of political actors with competences (regional government departments, central government departments, city councils, provincial councils, Júcar Hydrographic Confederation…), resistance of local governments to delegate or share competences, distrust or lack of cooperation between coalition government partners, both in the regional government and in local governments, to promote measures in a coordinated manner.

The fact that the autonomous communities initially needed to legitimize themselves politically also helps to explain the lack of

sufficient political and institutional space to have developed forms of government or governance on a metropolitan scale in the past. This is not only about processes, but also about the distribution of power, and it is possible that this issue explains to a large extent in the Spanish case the difficulty in moving forward. All these reasons, and undoubtedly many others, explain Spain's current "anomalous" situation in the European context, but do not justify it, because in many other countries it has not been an easy task, nor has it been free of conflict.

None of the often-cited factors necessary to favor metropolitan governance have come together in the Valencian case: the willingness of the actors involved to cooperate, the existence of structures that encourage cooperation and the capacity for political leadership (Kübler and Heinelt, 2005). There are no reliable indicators available at the metropolitan level; nor is there an adequate legal framework. But, above all, there is no tradition or political culture of cooperation, and this circumstance is probably the greatest impediment to fostering experiences of democratic governance. In this political and regulatory indeterminacy, local governments continue to show difficulties in "thinking together" on a metropolitan scale. There has been a lack of strategic focus, political will and the promotion of a metropolitan strategic plan capable of going beyond sectorial visions and territorial plans and with the capacity to integrate policies into more global visions.

In a very summarized form, the status of plans and projects concerning the València Metropolitan Area is as follows:

a) The València Metropolitan Territorial Action Plan, which was launched in 2016, has still not been approved in its final version and will not be approved during this legislature. The delay is basically explained by tensions and potential conflicts with local governments, among other reasons because it involves a change in the land development. In contrast, the historic Valencian orchard, *l'Horta,* does have an adequate territorial protection action plan and a specific law approved in March 2018. The recent agreement between administrations (April 2022) to guarantee a careful and detailed protection programme for the *Albufera de València* (Valencia lagoon) should also be included in the section on achievements and good governance practices between different levels of government. The protection of *l'Horta*, one of the most important cultural landscapes in the Mediterranean, as well as the agreements on the Albufera, are undoubtedly the best examples of good territorial and environmental governance culminated by the governments born with the change of cycle in 2015. In relation to *l'Horta*, the regional government itself, with financing from European Research and Development Funds (ERDF), is making progress in the completion of the *Anell Verd Metropolità de València*. This is a cycle-pedestrian pathway that connects *l'Horta* with the sea, linking the entire metropolitan area by means of historical and natural paths, as well as running through the natural parks of river Túria and Albufera and other green infrastructures and cultural assets (Conselleria de Política Territorial, 2022a). This context includes the declaration of Valencia as a *European Green City* for the year 2024 by the European Commission. A declaration which, far from remaining mere acknowledgments without any real

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significance, can be used to promote policies in line with the major strategic objectives pending.

b) In terms of metropolitan mobility, there has been some very recent progress, albeit discreet and belated. But, seen in perspective, the fact that during the last decade the VMA commuter service, which is the responsibility of the central government, has lost almost 30% of passengers (repeated episodes of chaos in the service due to cancellations have been commonplace until now) gives an idea of the current situation in terms of metropolitan mobility and of the challenges still to be met. This has taken place in a decade when the balance should have been the opposite, since we have recent incontrovertible evidence about the great impact of mobility on CO$_2$ emissions into the atmosphere (Liu et al., 2022).

The creation of the *Autoritat del Transport Metropolità* (Metropolitan Transport Authority, January 2017) and subsequent announcements of strategic plans and investments have not materialized. The "strategic mobility and infrastructure plans" that were launched in 2018 are also at a standstill in the relevant department. There are still too many doubts and some contradictions and disagreements, even between the same government partners, the most notable being the project to expand the northern terminal of the Port of Valencia. The Mobility Plan for the València Metropolitan Area (PMoMe), whose initial document was made public in May 2018, and which incorporated an excellent diagnosis, still lacks final approval, given that in June 2022 it was submitted to the public participation phase (Conselleria de Política Territorial, 2022b). In any case, it would need an unavoidable update, given that the metropolitan mobility plan does not incorporate the major impact of a future expansion of the port. The Strategic Programme for the Improvement of Mobility in the Valencia Region (UNEIX) included an investment programme which has not been implemented as planned.

The distribution of competences on metropolitan mobility between central, regional and local governments continues to show a chronic problem of coordination, underfunding of investments and management. It is one of the best examples to explain the existing governance deficit.

The agreement signed in July 2022 by the Ministry of Transport, Mobility and Urban Agenda, the Generalitat Valenciana and Valencia City Council to undertake the undergrounding of the railway access to the city deserves special mention, both for its great impact on the city and the metropolitan area and for being an excellent example of cooperation between the three levels of government. With a planned investment of more than 550 million euros (around 150 million euros from Next Generation funds), it is one of the largest urban projects in recent decades and, in addition to forming part of the works planned for the Mediterranean Corridor, it will also promote commuter mobility in the metropolitan area.

As a general balance, it could be stated that the daily mobility of the working classes in the metropolitan areas of the Valencian Community has not been a political priority for the public authorities. Public policies on metropolitan mobility have so far shown a lack of impetus from the administrations to give meaning to the principle of social justice and "spatial justice" (Soja, 2014). The absence of a genuine metropolitan bus transport network corroborates this, but rail is, if anything, a better example. Social groups with lower income levels, daily users of suburban and medium-distance services, have not been a priority in investment programs, renewal of obsolete equipment, and staffing. To this must be added the low level of execution, so far, of the investment planned for the period 2017–2025. The result, beyond cost overruns and waste of public resources (Romero, 2019) has been a marked and inexplicable imbalance in favor of high speed, a transport system commonly used by middle and high-income citizens. It has therefore not been a problem of resources, but an error of political priorities maintained for decades, that only now, as a consequence of the war in Ukraine, and dramatic circumstances for millions of low-income households, the public authorities are hastily trying to address with remedial and temporary measures to reduce ticket prices or temporary free travel. These measures and announcements can in no way hide the historic failure of mobility policies for metropolitan areas. It is necessary to balance priorities, significantly increasing funding for commuter trains and public transport and promoting structural measures for metropolitan mobility based on the principles of cooperation and coordination between the competent administrations.

c) In the area of subregional and supramunicipal strategic projects, in addition to the renewed focus on industrial estates and the Technology Park, the following stand out:

- The major logistics project Sagunt II, which has acquired greater strategic importance following Wolkswagen's announcement that it will install its giant battery factory there.
- the Strategic Plan for Valencian Industry (PEIV).
- Some municipal strategic plans such as the promotion of the Ribarroja industrial estate.
- The industrial plan for the metropolitan municipality of Aldaia.
- The strategic plan for agricultural land, the Urban Agenda 2030 and the new innovative and technological district of Vara de Quart, promoted by the Valencia City Council;
- The Metropolitan Forest project, promoted by the Quart de Poblet City Council in coordination with the regional government, which is an innovative initiative for the regeneration of an old degraded space. This initiative is part of a larger project, yet to be specified, to create a green corridor to link the Turia Natural Park with the Albufera. Undoubtedly, the best example of good multi-level governance is the agreement between administrations for the protection and management of the Albufera Natural Park. The project, which has a reserve of 100 million euros from the Next Generation funds, is shared: the regional government drafts the project, the execution will be carried out by the *Confederación Hidrográfica del Júcar*, and a new pipeline will also be built to

the west side of the Albufera to guarantee agricultural and environmental benefits. A further consequence of this good cooperation between administrations has been the declaration of Valencia as a Wetland City by the international Ramsar Convention.

d) In some public policies other than those we might call "traditional" (land-use planning, mobility, waste management or the integral water cycle), the absence of initiatives designed for the metropolitan scale is striking. Among these, two areas stand out: housing and social services. There is no metropolitan approach to public housing. The same is true of social policies. So far, there has been no possibility of promoting initiatives on a metropolitan scale. This is in contrast to the facilities that the competent department of the regional government has found to promote programmes in other regions, in many cases via associations of municipalities. An initiative such as the constitution of a consortium between the Generalitat Valenciana, the Diputación and the interested town councils of the metropolitan area would, in the opinion of those responsible for housing or social services in the autonomous region, be a powerful innovation. But so far it has not even been considered.

e) Finally, apart from the two metropolitan entities for waste management (EMTRE) and water services (EMSHI)— where cooperation works reasonably well—there are other cooperation initiatives between municipalities which, like many of the initiatives described in the previous section, cannot be considered experiences of metropolitan governance. This is the case for territorial pacts for employment, European projects and some discreet initiatives between municipalities integrated in some of the existing associations of municipalities in the Metropolitan Area of Valencia.

3.2.4. Metropolitan governance from the point of view of experts and policy makers

As part of the methodology used in this research, interviews were conducted with some of the best specialists who have worked on metropolitan governance in the Valencia Region. As was pointed out in the methodology section, they will remain anonymous and, due to this, their answers are treated in common in this section.

Like the vast majority of experts, they have been calling for decades for the need to "think metropolitan" and share the idea that Spain is not following in the footsteps that other countries in our region undertook some time ago. They also share the idea that academia and other experts have been doing their work, as demonstrated by the profusion of publications, international seminars and meetings held over the last two decades, but they agree that overcoming the existing blockage is only possible from the political sphere. They therefore attribute the responsibility for the lack of a metropolitan agenda, comparable to that existing in other countries, to political actors.

The interviewees underlined the deficits of coordination and cooperation between levels and spheres of government. They highlight the importance of the leadership of mayors, of the forms and the relevance of the "hidden political dimensions" that exist in each specific institutional context and that function as a blocking mechanism. They highlight the need for political actors to be able to create a favorable institutional environment, a shared narrative on the metropolitan reality, and, from there, to "think together" on an agenda based on respect for the identity of local governments and the feeling of belonging to the municipality. They note the distrust of the regional government and the reluctance of metropolitan mayors to cede powers. Some specialists consider it essential to promote regional legislation, and if necessary, state legislation, by amending or promoting basic legislation, to guarantee competences and funding for possible metropolitan entities, or to encourage cooperation between municipalities included in the metropolitan areas.

Most of the experts consulted are in favor of promoting flexible forms of governance around specific problems and, if at some point it is considered possible to promote legislation on metropolitan areas, it is suggested that a regulation for the Metropolitan Area of Valencia should be tackled first. Some specialists allude to the great obstacle posed by the existence of "anachronistic" and "obsolete" provincial councils. There is agreement on the priority areas on which political actors could focus the dialogue: strategies for adaptation to climate change, mobility, housing, social and residential segregation and vulnerable neighborhoods, waste management, spatial planning, social services, innovation and digital transition, training, economic promotion and employment. Finally, several experts warn of the risk of deadlock due to the resistance of municipalities. Experiences from other cases indicate that time, "metropolitan pedagogy" and highly dialogued processes capable of reconciling the implementation of governance models with respect for local autonomy are needed.

The opinion of some of the most relevant political actors, those responsible in the government of the *Generalitat Valenciana*, in different local governments, as well as political leaders of opposition parties, is much more illustrative, because of its novelty. From the interviews carried out in this study, it could be concluded that there are too many obstacles to guarantee a fluid dialogue between them. In fact, there is no institutionalized or informal space for dialogue between mayors of the Metropolitan Area of Valencia. A central idea stands out, recognized by some of the most representative political actors: "the metropolitan question is not on the agenda and does not advance because the fundamental obstacle lies in the internal dynamics of the political parties themselves, not only between parties of different ideological orientation, but also between the parties themselves that form part of government coalitions." Several other aspects were also highlighted:

a) In the opinion of some political leaders, there is no metropolitan "mentality" or "vision," therefore "there is no possibility of agreeing on a metropolitan agenda" beyond small concrete programs (civil protection) or some joint projects.

b) There is an absence of "shared leadership" in the metropolitan area. For some of them it is due to the lack of interest of the city of Valencia in playing its role, if not to its resistance to promoting the metropolitan agenda. For others, this absence of leadership is due to the fear of

many municipalities that the city of Valencia concentrates too much power, given its population weight.

c) Several policymakers also recognize the importance of "hidden political dimensions" as an obstacle, as well as mistrust between different political actors, even belonging to the same governing coalitions, and the reluctance to "create new spaces of power in an already very complex and somewhat confusing administrative map."

d) One policy-maker expresses a surprising argument about the transfer of competences to a new superior entity, stating that it "is not interesting because it does not bring votes."

e) Some policy makers complain about decision-making at the metropolitan level without prior consultation, especially by the regional government.

f) They note the resistance of the *Generalitat Valenciana* to cede competences and budgets. Also, the "richer" local governments are reluctant not only to cede competences or address priorities at the metropolitan scale, but also to assume responsibilities in some decisions that could imply some cost or political conflict for them, for example as a consequence of the approval of metropolitan territorial plans.

g) Some highlight the difficulty of the *Diputaciones* (provinces) to fit in; on the contrary, the view of the *Diputaciones*, institutions that cannot be considered as "external actors" to the metropolitan reality (if only because they are legitimized by rulings of the Constitutional Court), is very different from that of other political decision-makers.

h) Finally, they regret not having been able to take advantage of European funds; the failure to promote strategic metropolitan projects financed with public funds is the best example of this lack of dialogue, of a culture of cooperation and of a strategic vision.

In short, there are good and bad points in terms of supra-municipal cooperation in which, along with some positive initiatives, there are still contradictions and very clear examples of a lack of dialogue between local governments to tackle projects jointly. The greatest shortcoming is undoubtedly the impossibility of dealing with an integrated vision, at least for the 39 municipalities that make up the first ring, both for those issues that are a priority in European programs (mobility, environment, energy transition) and for those that guarantee social cohesion.

4. Discussion: future challenges and proposals

There is no need to keep stressing the existence of the metropolitan reality in the Valencian Region, which has been present for decades. Its problems and challenges for the future are well-known and similar to those of other metropolitan regions in neighboring countries. The fundamental problem is not one of diagnosis of the processes or identification of the main priorities, but of a lack of governance and political will. There is sufficient information and diagnoses to know what needs to be done. The who, how and when are lacking.

According to what has been analyzed and the interviews carried out, it is clear that the Metropolitan Area of Valencia lacks

the necessary political agreement between parties and competent administrations to reach a consensus and give coherence to major initiatives announced or underway with great territorial impact for the metropolitan region as a whole and for the autonomous community itself. Among the most important of these are the need to reach a multi-annual investment agreement between administrations; discussion about the need, design and impact of the extension of the so-called *bypass*; timetable and assumption of budgetary commitments to execute the railway access channel to the city of Valencia, the through tunnel, as well as the solution involving an exit to the north, being among the different existing options; completion of the park at the mouth of the Jardín del Túria; specific investment and staffing commitments to put an end to the chaos of the commuter train system and a timetable for negotiating the transfer of services to the regional administration; agreeing a solution for the logistics activities zone (ZAL) whose process has been declared illegal by the courts; and addressing the announced northern expansion of the Port of Valencia, considering its implications for the city and the metropolitan area as a whole and assessing, if necessary, other possible options, given that this will be a strategic decision that will mark a before and after for the future of the city and the region. If each administration continues to take decisions unilaterally, as it has done until now, with some exceptions, the degree of territorial incoherence and the environmental and social implications could be profound and irreversible.

The first difficulty, in addition to the lack of coordination and cooperation between levels and spheres of the different governments, is the impossibility of achieving the necessary basic consensus between political parties with parliamentary representation to promote legislation on metropolitan areas. This is a necessary condition, given that the Statute of Autonomy establishes that "metropolitan areas and groupings of comarcas will be regulated by Law of the Corts, also approved by a two-thirds majority, after consultation with the affected local entities" (Article 65.3). In the case of Valencia, it is certain that during the current legislature (2019–2023) there will be no progress in terms of specific legislation on metropolitan areas, and it is doubtful that progress will be made in the near future. Discarding this option for now as politically impassable at the present time, efforts should focus, in our opinion, on initiating dialogue between political actors and agreeing on flexible forms of governance that project coherence of public policies at different levels and spheres of government and at the same time favor public-private cooperation. Cooperative initiatives can be encouraged from the regional level or can emerge from local governments themselves.

The second difficulty lies in the absence of political will and the impossibility of placing the metropolitan question on the agenda through shared political leadership. Each country has its own history, territorial structure and institutional culture. The Valencian case, and probably that of other Spanish metropolitan regions, still requires a process of cultural and political maturation in each specific context. Perhaps the way forward is not so much to insist on the institutionalization of forms of metropolitan governance, but to place governments around the problems of the citizens, creating horizontal spaces of cooperation between public and private actors, combining the politics of concrete things, including "small policy" initiatives promoted in a coordinated

manner by municipalities, with a shared strategic vision for the metropolitan area as a whole for the 2030 horizon.

With the aim of starting an ambitious democratic conversation on metropolitan governance, we suggest, firstly, the creation of a space for dialogue between political actors, such as a "conference," "forum" or "convention" of metropolitan mayors, to share challenges and priorities. Secondly, based on the approach on "missions" as the only way to overcome the "Weberian" approaches by departments and administrations (Mazzucato, 2021), the regional government should promote the creation of specific sectoral roundtables on some of the major concrete problems: adaptation to climate change, energy transition, mobility, housing as a social emergency, social segregation, social and health services, land use, construction and layout of new infrastructures, innovation and economic promotion. Thirdly, if dialogue between local and regional governments makes it possible, the promotion of a "metropolitan strategic plan" for the 2030 horizon should be the next step. Fourthly, it would be necessary to address the major problem of local government competences and funding. Fifthly, we recommend exploring new ways of encouraging cooperation between several municipalities, using some of the existing spaces and legal concepts (associations of municipalities, consortiums, agreements) or taking advantage of other available regulations.

However, in the absence of other policies with a metropolitan vision, some positive initiatives deserve to be mentioned. The *Mancomunitat de l'Horta Nord* presented four projects to the "Next Generation" call for projects, basically aimed at improving sustainable mobility in the region. The initiative promoted by the *Mancomunitat de l'Horta Sud* is much more ambitious and of greater political relevance. Its strategic objective is to take advantage of the opportunity to allocate European funds to strengthen the capacities of a region made up of 20 municipalities, with half a million inhabitants and a solid industrial fabric. In fact, in October 2022, the *Mancomunitat* inaugurated its own office in Brussels (EUMAHS, European Municipalities Association Horta Sud). It has not been possible, so far, to articulate metropolitan projects in the context of the Urban Agenda 2030 as has been the case in other Autonomous Communities.

Currently, there are some contradictions in the city of Valencia. On the one hand, it has received more than 50 million euros of European funds to develop three municipal projects as a "low emission zone" and it is the world capital of sustainable food and hosts the headquarters of the FAO World Urban Food Center. Also, it has been selected by the European Commission among the 100 European cities to be climate-neutral by 2030 within the Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities mission (European Commission, 2022), and it has been chosen as "European Green Capital" for the year 2024. On the other hand, the same competent administrations that grant these funds maintain the port expansion project which, if it is implemented, would mean a very significant increase in road transport and pollution in the metropolitan area.

It does not seem that there are political incentives to really put the metropolitan issue on the political agenda, neither by the regional government, nor by the local governments of the metropolitan areas, nor among the political parties. But this should not be an obstacle to initiating informal dialogue between metropolitan mayors through an initial conference, convention or metropolitan forum. It would be the place to set up sectoral roundtables from the regional government on specific policies (with mobility and housing as priorities), promote a metropolitan strategic plan, and incorporate democratic innovations such as a "citizens' convention" of metropolitan Valencia into the discussion process. Finally, if the political and institutional context allows it, it would be important to lay the foundations for more ambitious initiatives such as legislation on metropolitan areas.

The Valencian case, as is the case in Spain as a whole, is no exception to the processes taking place in the metropolitan regions of our European neighboring countries, but it does reveal an institutional anomaly with respect to some of these European regions: the metropolitan reality does not form part of the political agenda and this is a great weakness. There are enough diagnoses, expert reports, plans and international seminars. What they indicate is far from the position and vision of the political actors. In this sense, it could be concluded that an exceptional opportunity has been missed, which is very unlikely to happen again. The fact that almost all the municipalities in the metropolitan area have been governed by coalitions of parties similar to that of the regional government could have been a great opportunity to promote the metropolitan agenda, but certain intangibles, which are of great importance to promote processes, have operated in this case as an obstacle. Not only has this window of opportunity to promote the metropolitan agenda not occurred, but during the second legislature there has been a certain slowdown in the promotion of measures at metropolitan level, a greater degree of distrust between government partners and the loss of opportunities of great importance to tackle ambitious and strategic joint projects at metropolitan level, taking advantage of the unprecedented existence of European funds.

Despite the fact that some academic circles, sectors of civil society and the media are beginning to include socio-environmental issues or conflicts of undoubtedly metropolitan scope among their concerns, the current political moment, marked by polarization and the end of the legislature, does not seem appropriate for promoting legislative initiatives for metropolitan areas in the Valencian Region. In this sense, the announcement made by the President of the *Generalitat* in October 2020 to promote legislation on metropolitan areas has been postponed. Given that this is an issue that requires broad prior consensus and agreements among many regional and local political actors, in order to stop being part of the "European anomaly" in terms of metropolitan governance, political impetus is essential. The costs of inaction far outweigh the potential benefits, as the dense geography of metropolitan regions in our neighboring countries demonstrates.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Author contributions

Funding

Acknowledgments

Conflict of interest

Publisher's note

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