



Fondazione CSF

PERSPECTIVES ON FEDERALISM



ISSN: 2036-5438

Cities challenging federalism: how subsidiarity can help

by

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Perspectives on Federalism, Vol. 17, issue 1, 2025



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Abstract

This paper explores the challenge that cities pose to federalism. Cities are increasingly emerging as sites not only of institutional pluralism, but also of social pluralism where democratic innovations take place. In this sense, cities are gaining importance as players beyond states from both a government and governance perspective. Through a comparative analysis of the constitutional recognition of cities in 27 federal and quasi-federal systems around the world, the paper investigates their constitutional status. Also by bringing the example of the Italian cities' case, the paper argues that cities within federal systems could receive greater recognition for their governance role in addressing pluralism – particularly societal pluralism – by engaging with their citizens and drawing on the contribution offered by the principle of subsidiarity in its horizontal/societal dimension. All in all, the recognition of what subsidiarity can offer to federalism would strengthen its capacity to better address societal pluralism through the role of cities.

Keywords

federalism, cities, subsidiarity, local democracy, institutional pluralism, social pluralism



1. Introduction

Urbanization as a phenomenon is increasing worldwide, with more than 4 billion people – over half of the global population – now living in cities (Ritchie 2024). According to the United Nations (UN), the critical year was 2007, when for the first time in history the number of people living in urban areas overtook the number in rural settings (Ritchie 2024). This phenomenon is expected to continue to increase, and because of that some have defined our times as a “*new urban age*” where the predominant institutional actors would be the city (Bloomberg 2015). This phenomenon can be observed as a general trend across both unitary and federal states. This also seems to be pushing the boundaries of our traditional Westphalian order based on states as the only actors in an international context (Hoeksma 2020) towards a more multi-level understanding of states with growing importance given to cities and other urban agglomerations. In fact, not only cities are emerging as laboratories of governance innovations in parallel to states, but also, they are increasingly claiming their role as protagonists beyond States’ borders and traditional administrative structures.

While the ‘city’ as a concept and idea has been the object of study for the human and social sciences for a while – for example, in philosophy (Lefebvre 1976; Weinstock 2014), political theory (Magnusson 2011; Barber 2013), geography (Harvey 2003: 939-941), history (Hörcher 2021: 1-12), urban studies (Jacobs 1961; Sennett 2006), economics (Florida 2017), sociology (Sassen 2005: 27–43), digital innovation (Ratti 2016) – only very recently it has gained the attention also of public law scholars. This research gap in public law started to be addressed with recent studies in comparative constitutional law (Hirschl 2020), administrative law (Auby 2013: 302–06), and public international law (Aust 2021). In the wake of that, also federal scholars (Arban 2022) started dealing with the idea of the city as distinguished from other local government entities. Federal and constitutional studies tend to focus on the *institutional* dimension of the city, which includes its constitutionalization (or not) as an autonomous level of government, its relationship with federal/state authorities, and the powers granted to that – in this way pushing traditional state-based federalism from a dual structure towards a three-tiered system. What receives less attention, however, is the *societal* dimension of cities and their capacity to support democratic innovations together with their citizens.



Given this, the paper addresses one essential research question: to what extent could federal theory evolve to better address the growing role of cities as laboratories for democratic innovations? To answer that, its structure starts by setting the scene on the rising role of cities and their role of laboratories of democratic innovations; it proceeds then with a comparative overview of cities in federal systems^I and some essential reflections upon the current challenges and limitations of federalism; it then brings to the table the contribution to cities coming from the subsidiarity principle and claims its relevance by reporting the Italian cities' case. In conclusion, the paper argues for the need for federal theory to be inspired from theory and practice of subsidiarity in order to be better equipped to deal with the urban age.

2. Setting the scene: the rising role of cities

At the international level the rising role of cities is emerging essentially through the growing number of transnational city networks^{II} through which cities are positioning themselves in the international arena as institutional actors willing to commit firsthand on certain topics like human rights, climate change, or sustainability to name a few. Sometimes this happens in relation to those international standards where the national government decides at the central level to step back, and therefore cities choose to independently take the initiative to commit themselves to such fields. Their rising role also emerges from the international fora where cities and their mayors have regularly met in recent years to influence global governance by coordinating local responses to global challenges^{III}. These newer forums exist alongside long-standing institutions like the Council of Europe (CoE) Congress for local and regional authorities, or the European Union (EU) Committee of the regions. In essence, cities are on the rise because they are at the forefront in problem solving (Barber 2013) or crisis governance (like for example the migration crisis, Kălin 2025), and they often deal with them more effectively than states.

This growing importance raises some fundamental issues. First, the issue of status. The question is to what extent and why a 'city' is or should be differentiated from other local authorities. Cities, in fact, many times constitute the first elected level of government together with other local authorities. At this local level of democracy many are the terms in



use: not only ‘cities’, but also ‘local governments’, ‘local authorities’, ‘local entities’, or ‘municipalities’. For defining this local unit of government sometimes also other terms like ‘territorial autonomies’, ‘subnational authorities’, ‘subnational entities’, ‘regional and local authorities’ are used, in this way not making any clear distinction between the two regional and local dimensions. Moreover, when talking about cities, there are different types of them, ranging for example from ‘megacities’ (Hirschl 2020) to ‘metropolitan cities^{IV}’, ‘capital cities’ (Slack 2012), or ‘intermediate cities’ (Morandell 2024). What seems true is that depending on the geographical and political context, sometimes the term city is used interchangeably with municipality, while some other times to differentiate a specific unit from other local authorities. This, however, leads to some confusion about what precisely a city is, and sometimes even a context-based approach is not enough to situate it.

Second, the issue of definition. The question is how a city is actually defined from both institutional contributions and doctrinal ones. Definitions differ based on aspects such as administrative boundaries, number of inhabitants, population density, history, competences, and so on. Starting from the institutional contribution, in the latest decades there has been a tendency in using the terms ‘city’ and ‘urban’. At the international level, we can see that through the UN work and program on urban development (UN-Habitat) and its related conferences (UN-Habitat I in 1976, Habitat II in 1996, Habitat III in 2016). Additionally, we can see that through the CoE European Urban Charters (I in 1992, II in 2008, and III in 2023) (Salati 2024b), which constitute holistic documents of soft law, which aim to provide an ideal vision for urban living drawing a catalogue of urban principles. Still, no precise definition of what a city is provided in such documents. Of a different kind is the contribution of the EU Commission, that in recent years took the leadership on this topic, and came up together with the OECD with a definition of ‘city’ based on grid cells used for statistical purposes in two important reports (in 2012 and 2020, EU COM and OECD 2020). Accordingly, *“cities consist of contiguous grid cells that have a density of at least 1500 inhabitants per km² or are at least 50% built up. They must have a population of at least 50.000”*. This EU COM-OECD definition of cities is people-based, founded on density and total population, and distinguishes cities from ‘towns and semi-dense areas’ and ‘rural areas’, according to the so called ‘degree of urbanization’ method. In the same report, cities were also distinguished from ‘functional urban areas’ (FUA, also called ‘metropolitan areas’). In parallel to the EU Commission, interesting is also the contribution of the European Parliament, that in a 2018



resolution stated that cities are “understood as towns, cities and urban and metropolitan areas, as well as small and medium-sized cities^V”, in this way basically putting under the same label all forms of urban settlements which are not rural.

With concern to doctrinal contributions, there is no single agreed upon definition to use. Administrative law scholars are looking at the ‘city beyond the municipality’ (Giglionni 2020: 267-284), pushing for the need for a new transversal categorization of ‘a law of cities’ (*droit de la ville*)^{VI} by acknowledging that traditional borders of urban areas have gone much beyond mere administrative borders. Sometimes, however, a ‘city’ may actually be smaller than its municipality administrative borders: this may happen for example if the municipality includes also a vast rural area inside its boundaries, which may be seen as non-city by its dwellers. Public law scholars are looking at ‘the city beyond the state’ (Pizzolato 2022) within general transformations of public law, focusing on that as a precise cultural and spatial concept which pre-dates nation states, and as the original dimension of democracy and law. Constitutional federal scholars are looking at the city as an autonomous legal entity to be distinguished from other local authorities. One interesting conceptualization considers cities as socio-economic and political spaces that require their own sphere of autonomy because that would be strategic for building new models of governance and reconciling diversity and social cohesion (Arban 2020).

The third fundamental issue related to the rising role of cities is their constitutional entrenchment as an autonomous level of government. This constitutes, indeed, the core matter for constitutional and federal scholars. Some scholars believe this could have many advantages because it would allow cities to enjoy significant regulatory initiative and autonomy (Hirschl 2020), and “to experiment new modes of governance for the urban area [...] as opposed to local governments” (Arban 2020: 323-345). At the same time, more skeptical positions pointed to the fact that constitutionalisation is not necessarily the solution since anyways in federations across the world the local level of government itself is often neglected (Saunders and Arban 2022), and there is a risk of generating unnecessary complexity among governmental levels, putting additional burden on bureaucracies, and deepening the urban-rural divide (Arban 2021: 343–57). With concern to cities in federal systems, section four will provide a comparative overview.

In sum, the three aspects of status, definition, and constitutional entrenchment of cities are the essential ones to consider when looking at the rising role of cities beyond the



municipality and beyond the state. In the end, the city is also the place where multiple legal orders coexist and find the concrete ultimate application of the legal acts they adopt (Salati 2023a: 144).

3. Cities as laboratories of local democracy

When looking at cities^{VII} as emerging institutional actors, one aspect which is often overlooked is their role of laboratories of local democracy together with their citizens first and foremost thanks to their proximity. This laboratory-oriented character is grounded on cities' capacity and attitude to experiment with different forms of citizen participation, which go beyond traditional representative democracy channels. Such forms can be addressed to as 'participatory practices' or also 'democratic innovations (DIs)', and they put cities – together with also other local governments – on the spotlight because they tend to take place at the local level (Allegretti 2015: 211; Hendriks 2012: 741). In this sense, the wider the local autonomy, the more local governments can experiment with new practices of civic participation (Palermo 2015: 506).

What lies at the core of such participatory practices are citizens' initiatives – whether institutionalized or not. The city, in fact, not only represents an actor of institutional pluralism, but also constitutes the concrete space where social pluralism^{VIII} can flourish and be supported also via institutional means. Citizens' initiatives could take place in both formal and informal ways. Informal initiatives are bottom-up participatory actions that do not have an institutional cover, while formal initiatives – whether their origin is top-down or bottom-up – are the ones that receive institutional recognition by public authorities. All such initiatives experiment with forms of civic engagement at the very local level of democracy and usually they involve a relationship with the local public administration.

Such participatory practices are well-known in the literature under the name of democratic innovations (DIs), and the majority of them can be traced back to four main types (Elstub and Escobar 2019): mini-publics, participatory budgeting (PB), referenda and citizens' initiatives, collaborative governance. Mini-publics are consultative bodies like citizens' assemblies or citizens' juries where a group of citizens deliberate on a specific issue to give input to decision-makers. Participatory budgeting are processes where citizens can



have a say in deciding how to allocate part of the public budget. Referenda and citizens' initiatives are instruments of direct democracy. Collaborative governance looks at a wide variety of practices where citizens contribute to the production and delivery of public policies and services. Other DIs are for example forms of civic participation in urban planning or community gardens, but many more could be found since there is no exhaustive list of them.

It is generally acknowledged that most of such DIs happen at the local level, in cities or other local governments. For example, it was demonstrated^{IX} that deliberative practices – even though they have been carried out at all levels of government – are mostly taking place at the local level. At the same time digital forms of participation (e-participation) are also becoming the normality across the world, and the growing trend for cities to become 'smart cities' can be observed everywhere. This on one side puts an emphasis on cities' role of local laboratories, while on the other it also stresses their multi-level entrenchment (Voorwinden 2022: 155-180; Falanga 2024: 1052–61).

All in all, even though their real impact is actually disputed (Jacquet 2023), such participatory practices make cities and other local governments emerge as key actors from both government and governance perspectives, in so far as not only they rely – as also higher levels of government – on traditional representative democracy channels (like elections, the party system, and political representatives), but also they can offer a wide array of participatory channels for people to engage in local democracy. This seems to be even more likely in those cases where additional legitimation comes from *ad hoc* legislation on participatory practices adopted by subnational governments (Trettel 2020). The flourishing of such participatory practices in many countries around the world constitutes, therefore, another reason for the rising role of cities.

4. A comparative overview of cities in federal systems

As a consequence of this widespread rising role of cities as protagonists beyond states, also federal scholarship – after a general blindness on cities and, more generally, on the local level – started to question the traditional two-tier approach of federal systems. This has traditionally been concerned with the relationship between the national/federal and subnational/state levels. The rising role of local governments in general and cities more



specifically, has been leading to a multiplication of public spheres in need of being recognized and studied also by federal scholars. They started dealing with that (Steytler 2009: 393–436) only in more recent years, talking of a third (Palermo and Kössler 2017: 281–315) or even fourth (Panara and Varney 2013) level of government, and essentially considering three main aspects: the degree of autonomy of local government, its relationship with other levels of government, its place in the constitutional framework (Saunders and Arban 2022: 33). For example, looking at the degree of autonomy of a local government means looking at the legislative or administrative capacity of local governments, and the levels of homogeneity and asymmetry within a federal system (Valdesalici and Nicolini 2024: 93–94)^x. Looking at the relationship between a local government and other governmental levels means looking at competences distribution or sharing – and financial arrangements – from the federal and state governments (Valdesalici and Nicolini 2024: 92–93). Looking at the place of local governments in the constitutional framework consists, in a nutshell, in analyzing the extent to which local governments are formally recognized and entrenched in constitutions or not. Because of the great variety that exists among local governments in federal (but also unitary) systems^{xi}, it is hard to reach a clear comparative taxonomy (Valdesalici and Nicolini 2024: 104), which is the reason why there is still a lot of confusion in this field of studies.

With concern, in specific, to cities in federal or quasi-federal systems, the first contributions came from North American federal scholars (Blank 2010; Frug 1980), who highlighted the limited status of cities as mere creations of states, while also anticipating their growing importance as actors beyond the state within a framework of "*international law of local government*" (Frug and Barron 2006). Their understanding of cities, however, did not make any precise distinction from other local governments, using these concepts in an interchangeable way. If one wants to better understand what is meant for "cities" in federal or multi-level systems, there is considerable confusion (as also seen previously in section 2), with labels depending on a wide array of criteria which are mainly context-based (disciplinary, demographic, legislative, etc.). Additionally, cities differ tremendously not only in terms of definitions, but also in terms of population, and size, and increasingly their boundaries do not match their metropolitan areas anymore (Slack and Chattopadhyay 2009: 305).

From a preliminary comparative overlook of explicit mentions of specific cities or urban areas and of terminological references to cities in the national constitutions of some federal or quasi-federal systems^{xii}, interesting considerations can be shared^{xiii}. A total of 27 cases



were analyzed (see Table 1 below)^{xiv}, and the keywords used for the research were: city, cities, capital, and the names of capitals and other main cities. Units whose names are the same for both a single municipality and the corresponding province or region, but which were included in the constitution in their capacity as a province or region, were excluded from this analysis^{xv}.

First, we can predominantly find a special constitutional entrenchment for capital cities, whether they are named as *“federal capital”* (Vienna, Kuala Lumpur, Islamabad), *“capital city”* (Addis Ababa, Abu Dhabi City), *“capital”* (Madrid, Rome^{xvi}, Kathmandu, Sarajevo), or *“the seat of parliament/government”* (Cape Town, Ottawa) to name just a few. This, however, is not always the case, since sometimes the capital city is not even mentioned in the constitution (Bern). Second, sometimes also other cities can find mention despite not being the capital (like Basel, Hamburg and Bremen), and despite not having any special status but simply being *“the largest towns”* (it is the case for example of the Cypriot Limassol, Famagusta, Larnaca and Paphos). Sometimes other cities are mentioned as *“cities of federal significance”* (like St. Petersburg and Sevastopol). Third, sometimes no cities at all are entrenched in the national constitution (United States). Cities may instead be included in sub-national constitutions or in states’ legislation: for example, the special status of the *“City of Brisbane”* as the capital city of the state of Queensland in Australia is contained in a special Act^{xvii}. Fourth, sometimes cities are also regions (Vienna, Brussels and Berlin) or city-states (Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen, Basel), or they coincide with their province (Buenos Aires).

Federal or quasi-federal system	Continent	Specific cities/urban areas mentioned in the national constitution	Terminological references to cities in the constitution & definitions of the mentioned cities/urban areas
Republic of Austria	Europe	Vienna	<i>Land</i> (Article 2) <i>Federal capital</i> (Article 5)
Belgium	Europe	Brussels	<i>Region</i> (art.3) <i>Region of Brussels-Capital</i> (Art.4) <i>City / Capital</i> (Art.194)
Federal Republic of Germany	Europe	Berlin	<i>Land</i> (Preamble) <i>Capital</i> (Art.22 – Berlin) <i>Greater Berlin</i> (Art.127)



		Hamburg, Bremen	<i>Land</i> (Preamble)
Italian Republic	Europe	Rome -	<i>Capital</i> (Art.114) <i>Metropolitan cities</i> (Art.114)
Kingdom of Spain	Europe	Madrid Ceuta, Melilla	<i>City / capital</i> (Art.5) <i>Cities</i> (Art.68)
Swiss Confederation	Europe	Basel	<i>City / land</i> (Art.1)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Europe	Sarajevo	<i>Capital</i> (Art.5)
Cyprus	Europe	- Nicosia, Limassol, Famagusta, Larnaca and Paphos	<i>Capital (Art.133)</i> to refer to the seat of the Supreme Constitutional Court. <i>Largest towns of the Republic</i> (Art.173)
Republic of India ^{XVIII}	Asia	Delhi	<i>National Capital Territory</i> (Art.239AA)
Nepal ^{XIX}	Asia	Kathmandu	<i>Capital</i> (Art.288)
Malaysia ^{XX}	Asia	Kuala Lumpur	<i>Municipality / Federal capital</i> (Art.154)
Pakistan	Asia	Islamabad	<i>Federal Capital / Islamabad Capital Territory</i> (Art.1)
Russian Federation	Asia	Moscow, St. Petersburg, Sevastopol' Moscow	<i>Cities of federal significance</i> (Art.65) <i>Capital / city</i> (Art.70)
United Arab Emirates ^{XXI}	Asia	Abu Dhabi City	<i>Capital city</i> (Art.9)
Federal Republic of Nigeria ^{XXII}	Africa	Abuja	<i>Federal Capital Territory</i> (Art.3)



		List of all states' capital cities (Umuahia, Yola, Uyo, etc.)	<i>Capital city</i> (Art.3, and Part I of the First Schedule)
Republic of South Africa	Africa	Cape Town	<i>The seat of Parliament</i> (Art.42)
The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia ^{XXIII}	Africa	Addis Ababa	<i>Capital city</i> (Art.49)
Union of the Comoros ^{XXIV}	Africa	Moroni	<i>Capital</i> (Art.10)
Argentine Republic	Americas	Buenos Aires	<i>Province</i> (Art.31) <i>City</i> (Art.44) <i>Capital city</i> (Art.129)
Brazil	Americas	Brasilia Rio de Janeiro	<i>Federal capital</i> (Art.18) <i>City</i> (Art.242)
Canada	Americas	Ottawa Toronto, Quebec, Halifax, Fredericton	<i>The Seat of Government of Canada</i> (Art.16) <i>City</i> (Art.68, seats of the provincial governments)
Saint Kitts and Nevis	Americas	-	-
United Mexican States	Americas	Mexico City	<i>Capital / Federal district</i> (Art.44)
United States of America	Americas	—	—
Commonwealth of Australia ^{XXV}	Oceania	Sydney Melbourne	Only mentioned in relation to the definition of the <i>seat of government</i> (Art.125)
Federated States of Micronesia ^{XXVI}	Oceania	-	-

Table 1 (Source: author's elaboration).



Since capital cities are the predominant ones seen by federal countries' constitutions, they are also the ones more studied by federal scholars, that have reorganized them in essentially three categories (Slack and Chattopadhyay 2012): federal districts, city-state, cities in provinces/states. Capital cities are federal districts when they are subject to federal legislation (Mexico city, Delhi); they are city-states when they have more power than other cities because their unit have the same border of their state/region/province (Berlin, Brussels); they are normal cities with the same status as all other municipalities in their country, when they fall under their province/state/region legislation (Ottawa, Bern, Cape Town). This diversity of arrangements for capital cities in federal and quasi-federal countries is with no doubt the result of various factors like historical traditions or political contexts. This stands out also if we look specifically at the European context, where this variety of constitutional arrangements for capital cities persist despite increasing legal standardization coming from shared principles of local democracy – such as the CoE 1985 European Charter for local self-government (Boggero 2025).

Obviously, the constitutional entrenchment (or lack thereof) of *cities* does not preclude the constitutional recognition of *local governments* as such, which appears to be more widespread, albeit with significant differences in the status and autonomy granted to them^{xxvii}. This is for example very evident among the 46 European countries (federal, quasi-federal as well as unitary) members of the Council of Europe: having all of them ratified the 1985 European Charter of Local Self-Government, they all decided to commit to the constitutional recognition of local authorities and their self-government capacity in their domestic legal orders. The Charter, in this way, has been said to constitute the fundamental basis for a new European constitutional local government law (Boggero 2018). Some other times, this constitutional recognition of local governments could also be quite impressive despite the lack of a constitutional recognition of specific cities as such: for example, this is the case of South Africa, where local governments have “*a status that at times equals or surpasses that of provincial government*” (de Visser 2024: 409).

All in all, it can be said that in most federal and quasi-federal systems, cities – except from capital ones – are not clearly distinguished from other local governments, but they are “*part of the vastly diverse network of local government entities*” (Saunders and Arban 2022: 40). At the same time, federal constitutions almost never recognize big cities (sometimes defined as megacities), or other cities whose economic, political, social and cultural importance has long



surpassed the capital city in importance (Kaufmann 2018). Such urban settlements usually need solutions to better address their metropolitan governance. Lastly, another consideration is that in many geographical contexts most cities are not megacities (or, obviously, capital cities) but are instead medium-sized cities, which, however, would need to be distinguished from other (smaller) local governments because of their role: this is clear for example if we look at the European context.

In conclusion, comparative research on the constitutional status of cities in federal systems points to the recognition given mainly to capital cities or a few other exceptions. Federal constitutions are silent on all other cities and urban settlements which, therefore, are seen as mere local governments despite their relevance for different reasons (like number of inhabitants, economic power, etc.). At this point, going back to our research question, it becomes key to understanding how cities in federal and quasi-federal systems (even if not constitutionally entrenched) could receive better recognition in their governance role to better deal with the complexity of urban phenomena.

5. Federalism beyond institutional pluralism: space for evolvement

Federalism is traditionally concerned with pluralism: in this sense, “*accommodation of pluralism has always been the backbone of federal studies*” (Palermo 2015: 499-513). At the same time, federalism has mainly focused on *institutional* pluralism and its accommodation within a common constitutional framework (Palermo and Kössler 2017: 6). Even most recent definitions of federalism look at that from this perspective, for example defining it as a value concept which “*refers to maintaining the proper balance between different levels of territorial authority*” (Popelier 2021: 46). Because of this, federalism has generally focused on regulating the relationship between the two national and subnational tiers of governments, and more recently also local governments as the third tier.

For its capacity to accommodate institutional pluralism, federalism is generally considered a useful answer to address different challenges in the distribution of public power. Challenges such as the relationship between national and subnational entities and the financial agreements between them, the prevention and resolution of conflicts, diversity management and accommodation of ethno-cultural differences, democratic legitimacy and



the opening of decision-making processes towards more societal actors, constitute only some among the multiple challenges that federalism with its toolbox (Palermo and Kössler 2017: 2) has been facing throughout years. The toolbox of federalism has developed so far as to foresee constitutional guarantees such as federal or quasi-federal forms of state, minorities protection, intergovernmental relations, decentralization, and special autonomy guarantee.

This traditional essential focus of federal theory on institutional pluralism, however, may be subject to criticism under a few aspects, among which two essential ones. First, its traditional overlook of participation of non-state actors in governance systems. As it has been written, in parallel to federalism as the expression of institutional pluralism we can find participatory democracy as the expression of societal pluralism (Palermo and Kössler 2017: 114). The question that remains open is, however, to what extent can federalism reinforce or constrain instruments of societal pluralism (Palermo and Kössler 2017: 115). The second main criticism of federal theory is its traditional interconnection with the state, and therefore its government (rather than governance) perspective. This has been recently defined as a *“feder(ation)alist approach”* (Alessi and Salati 2026; Alessi 2024) to underline the emphasis on the implicit connection between the concept of federalism and its state-related manifestations.

Among the challenges to face, there is growing consciousness among scholars of the need for federalism to better address societal pluralism (Palermo 2015: 499-513; Palermo and Alber 2015). In fact, more and more complex governance phenomena are emerging and challenging traditional federal thought in so far as they require federalism to go beyond its institutional dimension. For example, this can be seen in cases like urbanization, or the rise of the commons (Alessi and Salati 2026), where decision-making processes different from the traditional representative ones emerge more with actors (individual or associated citizens) getting involved through participatory channels.

At this stage, the key question becomes how federalism could better reflect this societal pluralism – first and foremost visible in cities, at the local level of democracy – and the answer that this paper brings forward is the principle of subsidiarity as an inspirational principle that could serve for that, thanks to its capacity to address not only institutional but also societal pluralism, and for its capacity to include both a government and governance perspectives.



6. From federalism to subsidiarity

Both federalism and subsidiarity could be understood as a response to the centralization of the state, and both support a vision of decentralization and local autonomy (Arban 2025). At the same time, while federalism has so far offered limited support to the growing role of cities as laboratories for democratic innovations, subsidiarity can contribute. In this way, some scholars have talked about “*subsidiarity beyond federalism*” (Arban 2025) for highlighting the fact that the application of subsidiarity goes (and potentially can go) beyond federalism.

Similarly to federalism, subsidiarity is an organizational principle looking at the distribution of powers. Over time, subsidiarity has been considered as a synonym of and used interchangeably with federalism, decentralization, multilevel governance, or treated as a federal principle, with its conceptual independence often having been denied or overlooked. However, subsidiarity should be understood as a universal principle, whose potential remains unexplored (Arban 2025), and it was also theorized as one of the seven overarching principles of constitutionalism (Barber 2018). There are three main reasons for looking at subsidiarity.

First, subsidiarity can be found not only in federal or quasi-federal states, but also in unitary states. If to give a broad overview of this principle (Arban 2025; Salati and Arban 2026), we can find it in the constitutional text of both federal or quasi-federal states – like Germany, Switzerland, or Italy for example – as well as unitary states – like Portugal, France, Georgia, Bolivia, Chad, Ecuador, Colombia, Sweden. In addition to national constitutions, subsidiarity can also be found in subnational constitutions: for example, in the constitution of the Ticino Canton in Switzerland. Subsidiarity can also be found as a constitutional principle in the international legal order of the Council of Europe, specifically at Article 4(3) of the 1985 European Charter of local self-government, and in the supranational legal order of the European Union, specifically at Article 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). Overall, subsidiarity is a principle adopted by countries for guiding competencies allocation and power distribution notwithstanding their federal or unitary character (Arban 2025). This aspect is what makes subsidiarity go ‘beyond federalism’ for its potential outreach to a considerable number of states.



Second, the value of subsidiarity as a universal constitutional principle should be acknowledged based on its recognition in both constitutional texts and court jurisprudence. Federalism, on its side, has traditionally been conceived primarily as a philosophical value, closely tied to the organization of the state and the distribution of power within it. While federalism focusses essentially on power distribution across the state as a political organization, subsidiarity looks at power distribution not only among state actors but extends its logic also to non-state ones, putting at the core of its approach the idea of autonomy.

Third, in relation to cities, subsidiarity does not need a constitutional entrenchment of cities to support them, because it already foresees a preference for the closest unit to citizens. We will see this in the Italian case (section 7). On the opposite, federalism typically favors one level of government – the subnational or federated entities (such as cantons, Länder, regions, etc.) – being *“concerned with protecting federated units from federal intervention”* (Arban 2025: 5). This may help explain why recent scholarly debates on federalism started lately to advocate for the constitutional entrenchment of cities and other local governments.

Despite its wide circulation, subsidiarity could be said to have a somehow disputed meaning. With a centuries-old pre-legal tradition that begun in social philosophy and was later taken up by the catholic social doctrine (Luther 2020; Salati 2023a; Salati and Arban 2026), nowadays subsidiarity as a constitutional principle can be found under many labels, and with essentially two main understandings: a prevalent one and a forgotten one. Preliminary research aimed at mapping the different labels under which subsidiarity can be found in (mainly Italian) doctrinal works and jurisprudence of the Italian constitutional court revealed that there are at least around twenty different ways to refer to subsidiarity, from circular to global, functional, active, fiscal, negative/positive, ascending/descending, polycentric – to name just a few (Salati and Arban 2026). If broader research were carried out on a global scale, many additional labels would likely emerge. However, one key consideration becomes clear: that despite the variety – and at times confusion – of meanings and interpretations that have been attributed to this principle over time, everything can ultimately be traced back to subsidiarity’s dual orientation: on one hand, toward territorial pluralism/autonomies; on the other, toward social pluralism/autonomies. In this sense, we can speak of two fundamental dimensions of subsidiarity: the vertical/institutional dimension and the horizontal/social one.



While in most constitutions and interpretations the overwhelmingly dominant understanding is that of vertical/institutional subsidiarity, it can be claimed that the horizontal/social meaning has largely been forgotten (Salati 2023b) – though it still exists, nonetheless. In a nutshell, while vertical/institutional subsidiarity looks at the vertical and hierarchical distribution of powers among different governmental levels, horizontal/social subsidiarity looks at the horizontal and collaborative distribution of powers between governmental levels and individual or associated citizens. Vertical/institutional subsidiarity is the understanding that we can find, for example, in the constitutions of Germany, Portugal, Georgia, in the TEU, or in the CoE 1985 Charter. The horizontal/social meaning of subsidiarity can be found explicitly mentioned in the Italian constitution first and foremost, but it may also be found implicitly in the constitutions of Spain, The Netherlands, Switzerland, and perhaps in many other, upon closer examination (Salati and Arban 2026).

If to argue that subsidiarity can be of help to federalism in the urban challenge, then its forgotten horizontal/social understanding becomes of key importance. That's why the last section of the paper will briefly introduce the special relationship between cities and horizontal/social subsidiarity in the context of the Italian case: this will be referred to as “the Italian cities’ case”.

7. Cities and subsidiarity: insights from the Italian cities’ case

The Italian cities’ case is an interesting one since it shows a mutual strengthening of cities and subsidiarity thanks to their relationship. Thanks to this constitutional principle in its horizontal/social dimension, cities are shaping collaborative forms of governance together with their citizens. Put in another way, thanks to horizontal/social subsidiarity cities are emerging as laboratories of democratic innovations.

As it has been claimed by some scholars, subsidiarity may indeed offer hope to city scholars as “*it provides a paradigm [...] for greater autonomy*” (Cahill and O’Sullivan 2022: 57). This seems to find a confirmation in the Italian context, where cities are strengthening their governance capacity not as a consequence of their constitutional entrenchment, but thanks to the constitutional principle of subsidiarity and its concrete implementation through a precise organizational model – defined as shared administration (*amministrazione condivisa*) –



and its administrative framework. The case of Italy is also an interesting one because it is not a federal nor a unitary system but is a quasi-federal (or regional) system. As a formally unitary state with strong regionalism, subsidiarity is contributing in Italy to the strengthening not only of metropolitan cities – as recognized by the constitution despite their still ambivalent nature (Boggero 2016) – but also of other local governments to innovate local governance with their citizens. Therefore, we can see the value of subsidiarity beyond purely federal systems.

Taking a closer look at what is happening in Italian cities – whose extensive treatment is discussed elsewhere (Salati 2023b; Salati 2024b) – in this section we can share, first, a general description of how subsidiarity is being implemented in cities, and second, some considerations and reflections useful to the cause of subsidiarity as a key enhancer of cities.

In its formulation at Article 118(4) of the constitution, horizontal/social subsidiarity outlines a duty for the state at all its levels to support all those individual or associated citizens that autonomously decide to take initiatives in the general interest of society. The uniqueness of this provision is that it mandates the state at all its levels to support civic autonomies – understood as individual citizens’ spontaneous initiatives for the general interest. Civic autonomies differ from private autonomies – that is individual citizens’ initiatives for personal interests. Subsidiarity has helped to proceduralize a shared governance between public authorities and citizens, and concretely speaking, this is happening in two ways. The first one, is the third sector legislation, which is implementing horizontal/social subsidiarity through the collaborative governance between public administrations and third sector organizations^{xxviii}. The second one is the organizational model of shared administration that, through its two instruments of a prototype municipal regulation on shared administration and the innovative legal tool of the “collaboration pact”, has given recognition to a shared governance between public administrations and associated/individual citizens. Starting from the pioneering (metropolitan) city of Bologna that in 2014 adopted the first regulation on shared administration – which from then started spreading to more than other 300 bigger as well as smaller cities around Italy to date^{xxix} – both third sector organizations and individual or associated citizens are *de facto* implementing the constitutional provision of subsidiarity through services of general interest or through the so called commons (or common goods). Commons can be defined, in a nutshell, as goods or resources of general societal interest whose governance – whether shared between societal and state actors or carried out by the



societal actors alone – can be collaborative or conflictual and goes beyond the traditional public-private dualism. In specific, subsidiarity seems to be the only principle that so far has provided for a stable constitutional anchor for the proceduralization of the governance of the commons, allowing for an institutional entrenchment of this phenomenon. As of today, starting from 2014, not only there are more than 300 public authorities – among which metropolitan cities, municipalities, and other local authorities – that have adopted this regulation, but there is a growing number of regional laws adopted that contain explicit reference to horizontal/social subsidiarity or shared administration, in this way contributing to the strengthening of this phenomenon bottom-up. For example, the regulation has been adopted by metropolitan cities such as Torino, Milano, Genova, Bologna, Venezia, Firenze, Bari, Rome, Palermo, Reggio Calabria, Sassari; medium-size municipalities such as Trento, Verona, Brescia, Livorno; smaller municipalities like Bagheria (PA), Capannori(LU), Corigliano-Rossano (CS), Sciacca (AG); mountain communities and unions of municipalities such as Unione della Romagna Faentina, and the XI Comunità montana del Lazio. Regions that to date have adopted legislation on this matter are Toscana, Lazio, Emilia-Romagna, Molise, Umbria, Marche, Piemonte, Puglia. Thousands of collaboration pacts have been signed between local authorities and citizens in cities on different policy areas spanning from social and welfare issues to education, spatial planning, urban regeneration, agriculture, environment, health, cultural initiatives, sport activities, innovation, and inclusion. This means that hundreds of thousands of citizens have been and constantly are engaged in this subsidiarity-based shared governance with public authorities, and especially with bigger municipalities and metropolitan cities, in this way showing the concrete impact of subsidiarity in cities and big urban areas^{xxx}.

In light of these essential aspects and its theoretical debate and practice, what emerges is that subsidiarity can work as an enhancer of cities thanks to its connection with some main aspects: citizens and societal pluralism, civic participation, local self-government, local democracy. Concerning *citizens and societal pluralism*, the Italian cities' case shows that the principle of subsidiarity is capable of giving value to the civic autonomy of individual and associated citizens that can contribute to the general interest out of their autonomous initiative. Such contribution can be seen as an innovative form of *civic participation* which is supported by subsidiarity in parallel to traditional representative channels in so far as it contributes to strengthening democratic legitimation. Subsidiarity is also permitting the



bottom-up emergence of cities and other local authorities as frontline actors in democracy, whose capacity of *local self-government* (or local autonomy) is being strengthened by the participation of individual and associated citizens. Lastly, subsidiarity is helping cities to better address urban challenges and solve urban problems together with their citizens, in this way creating an impact on *local democracy*. These four aspects point to the supportive relationship between cities and the principle of subsidiarity comprehensive of both its vertical/institutional and horizontal/social dimensions in the Italian context.

8. Conclusions: federalism looking ahead

The importance of cities will only grow in the coming years, posing new challenges to federal, quasi-federal, as well as unitary states and their political structures. A comparative analysis of cities within federal and quasi-federal systems reveals that constitutional recognition is typically reserved for capital cities or a few exceptional cases – and, in some instances, cities are entirely absent from constitutional texts. Overall, there is a clear pattern of neglect: despite their rising significance, cities are still predominantly treated as ordinary local governments, with little formal acknowledgment of their expanding democratic role.

The purpose of this paper was to understand the extent to which federal theory could evolve to better address the growing role of cities in federal and quasi-federal systems, especially looking at them as laboratories for democratic innovations. Many different ways could, of course, be possible. However, to answer this research question, the paper has argued that the principle of subsidiarity could be of primary help to federalism. In doing so, the paper offered some considerations also in light of the Italian cities' case, bringing that as a good example of how hundreds of cities of all sizes have been strengthened by the principle of subsidiarity, and by that empowered in their innovation capacity together with their citizens.

In fact, to deal with the rising role of cities as actors of democratic innovations, a space for evolvement for federalism could be seen in going beyond its traditional focus on institutional pluralism towards better support of societal pluralism. Therefore, two are the key take-home messages for federalism from the experience of subsidiarity. The first one is to take inspiration from subsidiarity to go all the way down to cities and not stop at the



federal-state/regional dichotomy. Going all the way down to cities means to value cities (and other local governments) in a multi-level system in which the local level should be recognized and supported by higher governmental levels in its local self-government capacity to experiment with democratic innovations. This also implies supporting an even wider decentralization of power. The second one is to take inspiration from subsidiarity for its (often forgotten) horizontal/social dimension, which allows a better and deeper involvement of individual and associated citizens in the co-creation of the city and its local democracy. Subsidiarity in this way shows that it is possible to bring back individuals and groups in local democracy beyond traditional representative channels, by doing that through new participatory forms better capable of reflecting societal pluralism. All in all, subsidiarity emerges as a principle capable of encompassing both government and governance perspectives, reflecting both institutional and societal pluralism, as well as territorial and civic autonomies.

To conclude, subsidiarity can help federalism on these two key points by providing an additional value to better address the challenges posed by the city century. The rediscovery of subsidiarity – particularly its forgotten horizontal/social dimension – could lead to a further strengthening of the key role of cities within federal states, as well as within unitary states. After all, federalism already has a “*favourable disposition*” (Hirschl 2022: 95) towards subsidiarity: the task now is simply to deepen this relationship by fully recognizing both dimensions that subsidiarity offers.

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^I Terminology used following Palermo, Francesco, and Karl Kössler. *Comparative Federalism: Constitutional Arrangements and Case Law*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.

^{II} For example, in Europe see Eurocities (<https://eurocities.eu/>), United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) (www.uclg.org), The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) (<https://www.ccre.org>), Intercultural Cities (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities>), Energy Cities (<https://energy-cities.eu>), Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI) (<https://iclei.org>), Human Rights Cities (<https://humanrightscities.net/>). Beyond Europe see the C40 network on the climate crisis (<https://www.c40.org/>), or the Sharing Cities Action on platform economy (<https://www.sharingcitiesaction.net/>).

^{III} See for example the Global Parliament of Mayors (<https://globalparliamentofmayors.org/>), and the UN Forum of Mayors (<https://unece.org/forumofmayors>),

^{IV} For example, in Italy or India: see Steytler, Nico, editor. *The Forum of Federations Handbook on Local Government in Federal Systems*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024.

^V European Parliament resolution of 3 July 2018 on the role of cities in the institutional framework of the Union (2017/2037(INI)), *OJ C 118*, 8 April 2020, p.5.

^{VI} “*The law of cities can be simply apprehended as the law applicable to various essential dimensions of cities functioning: [...] and*



it is possible to go through these various issues without too much wondering whether you are in the field of constitutional law, administrative law, planning law or whatever" (Auby, Jean-Bernard. 'Droit de La Ville. An Introduction'. *Italian Journal of Public Law*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2013, p.303).

^{VII} In this section, by looking at them as laboratories of local democracy, we will not distinguish between cities and other local governments. With concern to democratic innovations, in fact, it seems not yet necessary to distinguish between the two, as no significant differences have emerged so far.

^{VIII} Dahl, Robert Alan. "Polyarchy, Pluralism and Scale." *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1984, p. 232: "social pluralism - that is, a diversity of social organization with a large measure of autonomy with respect to one another".

^{IX} 52% out of a total of 282 analyzed cases: see OECD. *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions Report. Catching the Deliberative Wave*. 2020 (p.16).

^X It is useful to report also the contribution of public administration scholars who developed many indexes to measure local autonomy: among the others, see the LAI in Ladner, A., Keuffer, N. and Bastianen, A. (2021). *Local Autonomy Index in the EU, Council of Europe and OECD countries* (1990-2020). Release 2.0. Brussels: European Commission.

^{XI} For a recent comparative study of local governments in 16 federal or federal-type countries, see further Steytler, Nico, editor. *The Forum of Federations Handbook on Local Government in Federal Systems*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. The comparative study analyses local governments (LGs) through the specific aspects of: history, structures and institutions; constitutional recognition; governance role; finances; supervision by higher levels of government; intergovernmental relations; political culture.

^{XII} For the selection of federal systems, we used the list of 25 countries provided by the Forum of Federations (<https://www.forumfed.org/federal-countries/>). For the selection of quasi-federal systems, we limited our analysis to the two cases of Italy and Spain, even though the list could be longer.

^{XIII} In this preliminary work we look only at federal or quasi-federal countries. However, cities are often recognized also in the constitutions of unitary states: just to name a few, Prague is referred to as the *capital city* of the Czech Republic at Art.14 of the constitution, Sofia as the *capital city* of Bulgaria (Art.169 of the constitution), Ankara is the *capital* of Turkey (Art.3 of the constitution).

^{XIV} This comparative overlook and related table are highly preliminary, as they are based on the author's consultation of national constitutions in English translation (rather than in their original languages) and on secondary sources such as existing literature. They do not aim at reflecting a comprehensive or systematic analysis of all constitutional texts, and some inaccuracies or omissions may be present. The constitutional texts were accessed in the official English versions of the CoE CODICES database <https://codices.coe.int/codices/documents/welcome>. For those constitutions not available on this database, explicit reference is made.

^{XV} For example, this is the case of Trento and Bolzano, referred to as "*autonomous provinces*" in the Italian constitution (Art.116), for their special autonomy guaranteed by a basic law of the same rank of national constitutional laws. Their naming, however, is the same of the respective municipalities. Similarly, also Salzburg is included in the Austrian constitution (Art.2) as an "*autonomous land*", and not as Salzburg city/municipality.

^{XVI} For an inquiry on the constitutional status of Rome and its still underdeveloped symbolic and functional significance see Citino, Ylenia Maria. 2025. 'Rome as a Determinant of the National Constitutional Identity', in *Perspectives on Federalism*, E-38-51.

^{XVII} See the City of Brisbane Act 2010 <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2010-023>.

^{XVIII} Accessed here <https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india/>.

^{XIX} Accessed here https://ag.gov.np/files/Constitution-of-Nepal_2072_Eng_www.molipa.gov.npDate-72_11_16.pdf.

^{XX} Accessed here <https://www.sprm.gov.my/admin/files/sprm/assets/pdf/penguatkuasaan/perlembagaan-persekutuan-bi.pdf>.

^{XXI} Accessed here <https://www.uaegislation.gov.ae/en/constitution>.

^{XXII} Accessed here <http://www.nigeria-law.org/ConstitutionOfTheFederalRepublicOfNigeria.htm>.

^{XXIII} Accessed here <https://ethiopianembassy.be/wp-content/uploads/Constitution-of-the-FDRE.pdf>.

^{XXIV} Accessed here <https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC128670/>.

^{XXV} Accessed here https://www.aph.gov.au/-/media/05_About_Parliament/52_Sen/523_PPP/2023_Australian_Constitution.pdf.

^{XXVI} Accessed here <https://www.fsmlaw.org/fsm/constitution/>.

^{XXVII} For a starting point on that, see Palermo, Francesco, and Karl Kössler. 2017. *Comparative Federalism: Constitutional Arrangements and Case Law*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 281-315, where the authors conclude that in general, despite constitutional recognition, local governments are in general "*policytakers, not policymakers*", with



their local autonomy being far than equal to subnational autonomy (p.315). See also Steytler, Nico, editor. *The Forum of Federations Handbook on Local Government in Federal Systems*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024.

xxviii The reference point on third sector in the Italian context is the legislative decree no.117/2017 (“Codice del Terzo Settore”). Accordingly, at Article 4 of this decree, third sectors organizations are listed: for example, we can find associations, social enterprises, community cooperatives, private foundations. The term ‘third sector’ was coined in Etzioni, Amitai. ‘The Third Sector and Domestic Missions’. *Public Administration Review*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1973, pp. 314–23, for referring to a third alternative between the two dominant State (public) and market (private) sectors. For the Italian constitutional debate related to the third sector see further Gori, Luca. *Terzo Settore e Costituzione*. Giappichelli, 2022.

xxix For an up to date list of Italian cities that have adopted this prototype regulation see the work of Labsus – Laboratorio per la sussidiarietà at <https://www.labsus.org/i-regolamenti-per-lamministrazione-condivisa-dei-beni-comuni/>.

xxx For the latest up to date numbers and graphs, see the Labsus 2024 annual report at <https://www.labsus.org/rapporto-labsus-2024/>. For an overview of the Italian cities’ case through municipal regulations, legislation, debates, and concrete stories and photos of currently active collaboration pacts across Italy see www.labsus.org.

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