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Metropolitan governance in the context of dynamic urbanization: the case of Brazil

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This study discusses the evolution of metropolitan governance in Brazil and uses greater São Paulo as an in-depth case study to demonstrate how metropolitan governance is organized in a megacity region in the Global South. This is of interest as many publications in this specific academic field focus on European or North American city regions that are, on average, smaller in size and part of multi-level governance systems. Hence, many theoretical positions that are established in the scholarly debate do not work well in the context of megacities. The study will describe how the metropolitan governance arrangement in greater São Paulo evolved and reflected on the setbacks and success of metropolitan planning and policies in the context of uncertain state support. Metropolitan regions have been established in Brazil by the military regime in the mid-1970s for industrialization and comprehensive top-down planning. After the fall of the regime in the 1980s, the question of metropolitan regions was delegated to the states which created a sort of institutional vacuum and a lack of dedicated policies. In 2018, however, Brazil had 76 institutionalized metropolitan regions but these differ in size and institutional strength. The metropolitan region of São Paulo is the biggest as it comprises 39 municipalities with approximately 20 million inhabitants. However, given the dynamic of expansion, the question of establishing an appropriate scale emerged. Attempts to create a governance arrangement for regional development and strategic planning for the so-called São Paulo Macrometropolis with 172 municipalities and roughly 32 million inhabitants failed. However, in a separate process, over decades, seven metropolitan regions emerged on a smaller scale (the São Paulo Metropolitan Region being one of them). The study is based on a literature review, document analysis (laws in particular), and workshops with Brazilian colleagues that happened within the context of a research project on environmental planning and water governance in the greater São Paulo Metropolitan Region.

KEYWORDS

Brazil, São Paulo, São Paulo Macrometropolis, metropolitan regions, metropolitan governance

1. Introduction—Metropolitan governance in Latin America

The governance of metropolitan regions in Latin America has found much less attention than metropolitan governance in Europe or North America. At least many of the most-cited books and articles focus on Europe or Canada and the US (Salet et al., 2003; Heinelt and Kübler, 2005; Rosan, 2016; Keil et al., 2017). Latin American city regions offer, however, a rich and variegated experience of metropolitan governance (Lanfranchi and Bidart, 2016; Slack, 2019; Nieto and Amézquita, 2022). This raises the question of whether the knowledge

and the positions that are well-established in the scholarly debate have the same value in the context of Latin America—a question that has met increasing attention in the debate on post-colonialism (Lawhon and Truelove, 2020). Many contributions addressing the situation in Europe or the US and Canada were triggered by changing governance and state paradigms in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Swanstrom, 2001; Heinelt and Kübler, 2005). The changing welfare state and territorialized competition in the globalized economy were the main focus (Brenner, 2004).

In Latin America, the situation is slightly different. An overall trend toward decentralization, rapid (and informal) urbanization, and regular economic and political disruptions are contextual factors having a strong influence on what happens in the biggest agglomerations of this region (Frey, 2012, 2019; Klink, 2013, 2017; Lanfranchi and Bidart, 2016; Nieto and Amézquita, 2022). In addition, metropolitan governance in Latin America evolves within a different type of statehood that is partly developmental and struggling with decentralization reforms (Evans and Heller, 2015; Schlegel, 2022). Major issues of concern in Latin American metropolitan areas are inequality, unequal provision of services, environmental justice, provision of housing, security, and financing of metropolitan services (sewage, transport, and energy) (Lanfranchi and Bidart, 2016; Nieto, 2022; Valenzuela Van Treek et al., 2022). Last but not the least, it is the mere size of many urban agglomerations in Latin America that poses a remarkable challenge for governance and governability—which is also true for other megacity regions on other continents (Slack, 2019, 2021; Lefèvre, 2020).

The process of institutionalization of metropolises in Latin America is also influenced by the economic context of being on the periphery of global capitalism and, in addition, a neoliberal model of development (Ribeiro, 2018). The preponderance of this economic dimension is the reason for the low preparedness for regional cooperation. It has as a premise, and as a consequence, the mobilization and greater representation of the local business community and consequently, the adjustment to the interests of the local political and economic elite. In this sense, the discussion on metropolitan governance must consider the plurality of institutional arrangements, the differences and dilemmas of the political-administrative culture(s), as well as the political interests at stake and the respective underlying policies (Frey, 2012). A more functionalist reading, based on the experience of the theoretical and analytical approach from European or North American experiences, does not account for this complexity.

This poses the question of whether discussing metropolitan governance in Latin America needs a more tailor-made perspective—also taking into consideration the debate of scholarly knowledge production in times of globalized urban studies (Lawhon and Truelove, 2020). Some of the established approaches and ways of seeing things in the scholarly debate on metropolitan governance may be universal. The design of institutions for governing metropolitan affairs would usually consider categories, such as economies of scale in the public sector, and the legitimacy of supra-local institutions (Keating, 1995; Baldersheim and Rose, 2010; Zimmermann, 2014). Against this background, the political tension between regional integration (i.e., a stronger city-regional government) and decentralization (i.e., the

empowerment of local self-government) is a contradictory logic inherent in every attempt to solve the problems of institutional fragmentation in city regions (Barron and Frug, 2005). On a more practical level, the inter-municipal coordination of land use policy and public transport, among others, are essential elements to reach the goal of sustainable urban development, and we would expect this to be a problem in almost every city region around the globe (Rosan, 2016).

Specific aspects that need to be taken into consideration in Latin America are as follows (Lanfranchi and Bidart, 2016; Nieto, 2022; Valenzuela Van Treek et al., 2022):

- a strong role for public enterprises such as EMBPLASA or DAEE in São Paulo (see below) or SACMEX in the Mexico City Metropolitan Area (Nieto, 2022);
- strong sectoral planning and management (water, sanitation, and energy);
- environmental issues (nature conservation and environmental risks);
- less focus on economic development or economic regionalization (Lanfranchi and Bidart, 2016; Nieto, 2022; Valenzuela Van Treek et al., 2022);
- suburbanization of the industry;
- unclear or competing definitions of boundaries of city regions.

At the same time, we observe that a lack of institutionalization of city regions is a global phenomenon (Sellers and Hoffmann-Martinet, 2009; Ahrend and Schumann, 2014; Scott, 2019). Latin America is no exception to that. As in Europe, the variety of institutional solutions is high in the Latin American context (Nieto and Amézquita, 2022). In some states, only single cases do exist (Chile—Greater Santiago, Valenzuela Van Treek et al., 2022) and there is no nationwide strategy. In other states, the number of city regions is much higher (Colombia and Brazil have the highest number of city regions) and national strategies exist. We observe exceptional cases—such as Quito—and many attempts with less success (Nieto and Amézquita, 2022).

In this study, we discuss the case of Brazil. Brazil is an interesting case in the Latin American context as the federal government took the initiative and decided upon a federal framework law to support the creation of metropolitan regions in 2015 (the statute of the metropolis). As we will show, the implementation of this statute is hampered by the federal structure of the Brazilian state, strong political polarization, and the context of an emerging, though unstable economy. We argue that this situation puts into question our existing knowledge of metropolitan governance and calls for new ways of theorizing.

2. Materials and methods

The different sections of the article refer to different sources for different purposes. For all sections, we used a literature review. Sections 4, 5 are, in addition, based on an analysis of laws, bylaws, and policy documents (documents analysis). We also analyzed the plans in progress (using the PDUI online

platform¹). The literature review and documents analysis allowed us to describe the formations of the metropolitan regions (MR) in greater São Paulo and how the actors, their relations, and values influenced it. This study is also a result of a joint research project on environmental planning and water governance in the São Paulo Macrometropolis. In this project, researchers from the Federal University of ABC, São Paulo, Brazil, and TU Dortmund University, Germany, cooperated from 2019 to 2022. During the project, meetings and workshops were held, where it was possible to discuss metropolitan environmental planning and governance, considering the particular conditions of multi-level systems and power relations in comparison.

3. Theoretical positions

With regard to theoretical perspectives, the positions on metropolitan governance are decades old and the debate has not made any significant progress over the last few years (Tomàs, 2020). The well-established differentiation between a metropolitan reform position and a public choice position is based on normative assumptions and two different paradigms of statehood (Ostrom, 1972; Bish and Ostrom, 1973). The metropolitan reform position mirrors a strong state with ambitions to deliver territorial welfare through coordinated regional development policies. In terms of organizational structures, a single-tier authority or two-tier authority is thought to be an effective solution. These authorities are multipurpose organizations with considerable legitimacy (a strong regional council and/or directly elected metropolitan mayor) (Kübler and Heinelt, 2005; Zimmermann, 2014). The broad portfolio of competencies would allow also for redistributive regional policies through land use planning and management of public infrastructures such as transport.

The public choice position in contrast favors competition between jurisdictions to secure cost-efficient solutions for services in a city-regional context (Ostrom, 1972; Kübler and Heinelt, 2005). It is assumed that citizens and firms are mobile and have complete information to compare the offers of different jurisdictions and make a choice on where to settle down. The price mechanism will result in a sort of equilibrium. Territory, understood as metropolitan functional space, is not relevant for public choice protagonists but local jurisdictions are. The public choice position may be suitable in the US context where municipalities have higher leverage and home rule. In states with territorial welfare policies, more complex fiscal redistribution schemes, and more universal standards with regard to local government service, the position is less relevant.

The new regionalism is another paradigm that emerged in the context of changing welfare states in Europe and North America from the 1990s onwards (Swanstrom, 2001). The main novelty of this approach was a shift of governance: public–private partnerships, networks, or other forms of collaboration in flexible territories were much *en vogue* and considered being institutional innovations. In contrast to the metropolitan reform position and the public choice position, the new regionalism did not refer that much to public services but was influenced by ideas of the new

economic geography and economic regionalism in the context of economic globalization and the creation of the European common market in the 1990s (Brenner, 2004).

Taking into consideration the challenges in many metropolitan areas, the abovementioned positions neglect many issues that are at stake in the current period—and, in particular, in megacity regions in the global south (Labbé and Sørensen, 2022): Climate change and resilience, social polarization, extreme urbanization, and peri-urbanization are just some of the pressing issues calling for institutional solutions. In addition, the institutional positions [Consolidation (metropolitan reform), Competition (public choice), and Cooperation (new regionalism)] seem to be too dichotomic to capture the current reality of metropolitan governance.

Other ways to discuss metropolitan governance refer more directly to organizational forms and their effectiveness and the level and type of institutionalization:

- Fragmented governance: strong local governments without any regional tier of coordination.
- Consolidation I: single-tier authority (city-state, amalgamation of existing jurisdictions, strong government).
- Consolidation II: two-tier system (regional tier of coordination and service provision with municipalities being the constitutive elements; regional council made of delegates of municipalities).
- Voluntary cooperation/city-network/contracting: flexible cooperation and variable agreements, not necessarily with an understanding of a common territory as a basis.
- Issue-based cooperation (sectoralization and agencies, i.e., school districts, transport associations, water governance, special economic zones, and infrastructure corridors).
- Regionalized state agency: no local self-government but a state agency for a specific purpose.

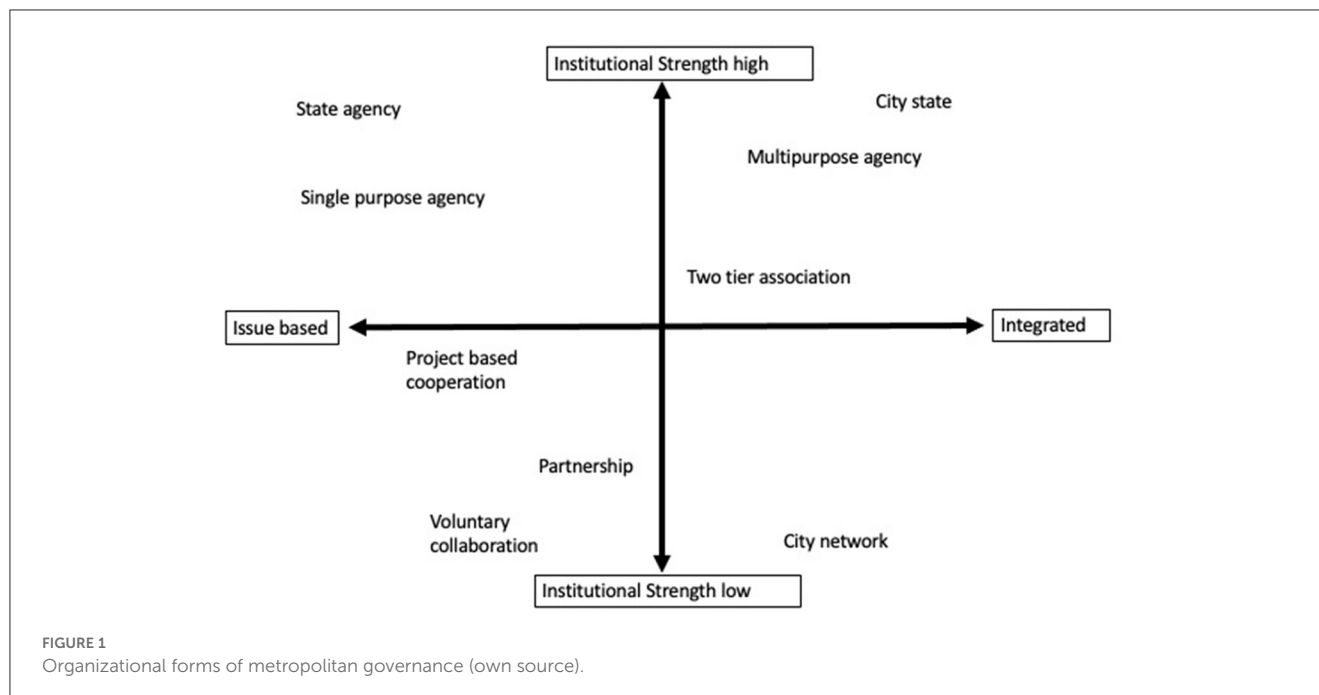
Often, a mix of these institutional solutions is observable, creating a polycentric arrangement with fragmented or even competing regionalization initiatives. The following matrix seeks to visualize the complexity of metropolitan governance and is made of two axes: institutional strength and scope of institutional cooperation (issue based vs. integrated).

From an institutional design perspective, the solution for the lack of coordination and cooperation in metropolitan areas seems to be fairly clear. Lefèvre emphasizes five characteristics of an effective metropolitan governance structure:

- political legitimacy through direct election;
- geographic boundaries that match the functional territory of the metropolitan region;
- independent financial resources;
- relevant powers and responsibilities; and
- adequate staffing (Lefèvre, 2008).

These characteristics point to a consolidated one-tier or a two-tier government structure (upper right quadrant in Figure 1). However, there are only a few exceptional cases that come close to this ideal solution. In Europe, Lyon, Stuttgart, Hanover, and Barcelona are exemplary cases (Gerohözi and Tosics, 2018;

1 <https://pdui.sp.gov.br/> (accessed January 14, 2023).



Zimmermann and Feiertag, 2022). In many other city regions, low organizational or financial autonomy of metropolitan institutions (if existent at all) and a lack of clearly articulated institutional relations between different levels of government prevail (Scott, 2019).

In the following section, we introduce the case of Brazil and describe how the problem of metropolitan regions has been addressed in this state.

4. The context and practice of metropolitan governance in Brazil

The creation of metropolitan regions in Brazil goes back to the early 1970s when the military regime established nine metropolitan regions, mainly for industrial development (Klink, 2014, 2017; De Azevedo Pinheiro Hoshino and Moura, 2019; Slack, 2019). This also included the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo (see details below). The post-regime constitution of 1988 did not give much attention to metropolitan regions (Klink, 2017). The focus was instead on decentralization and administrative and political strengthening of municipalities (Schlegel, 2022). The eventual creation of inter-municipal entities was delegated to the states (Souza, 2007; Abrucio et al., 2010).

In the more recent period, however, some national legislative changes happened. In 2005, federal law defined the legal context for inter-municipal consortia and inter-municipal cooperation agreements as institutional templates for intensified inter-municipal cooperation (Klink, 2017; Slack, 2019). Consortia are thought for various kinds of public services and are also eligible for taking loans. State agencies may be a partner in a consortium. In terms of institutional strength and organizational autonomy, consortia are rather weak, although they may employ staff.

Metropolitan regions (MR) are a different type of organizational solution for metropolitan governance in Brazil. While consortia are thought for all kinds of territories (including rural regions or towns and their hinterland), metropolitan regions are considered to be the solution for larger agglomerations. In 2015, the federal government decided on the Metropolitan Regions Act or Metropolis Statute that defines a legal framework for MR (Araújo et al., 2016; De Azevedo Pinheiro Hoshino and Moura, 2019). The *Estatuto da Metrôpole* is a federal guideline for the planning, management, and execution of public functions of common interest in metropolitan regions that need to be, however, implemented by the states (and not by the federal government). In this law (federal law no. 13.089 from 12 January 2015), a public function in the common interest (*Função Pública de Interesse Comum*—FPIC) is defined as being a public policy or an action whose execution by a single municipality is unfeasible or causes negative externalities for neighboring municipalities. The statute also suggests a template of collaborative governance, composed of an executive body, a council as a decision-making body, a public agency with technical-consultative functions, and an integrated system of resource allocation and accountability. All MRs in the state of São Paulo have this structure as stipulated in the laws that established them, even the ones created before the Metropolis Statute.

The main instrument for the management of an MR foreseen in the statute is an integrated urban development plan (*Plano de Desenvolvimento Urbano Integrado*—PDUI). The PDUI is defined as an instrument that establishes the guidelines for strategic territorial development and structuring projects for the metropolitan region. In principle, metropolitan regions should facilitate the collaborative implementation of public services that are in the common interest. Note that federal law is a sort of framework law and it is up to the states to take the initiative for establishing metropolitan regions.

According to [D’Almeida and Franco \(2018\)](#), the metropolis statute is the result of the broad experience made with participatory processes in the elaboration and implementation of municipal master plans that were legally defined by the *Estatuto da Cidade* (city statute) from 2001. Just like the city statute defines the “Social Function of the City”, being the central focus of municipal master plans, the metropolis statute defines public interests (FPIC) as a fundamental element of the PDUI. It is, however, a very poorly defined element of the statute, and its relationship with the “Social Function of the City” is not clearly defined.

The creation of metropolitan regions is a state competence and most states have used this competence ([Observatório das Metrôpoles, 2015](#); [World Bank Group, 2015](#); [Slack, 2019](#)). With regard to the process, the states need to consult the municipalities when establishing a metropolitan region but, in practice, this has not happened in the way local governments would expect (see Section 5.2). In addition, once the metropolitan regions are established, most of the state governments do not support them enough in terms of financing and political support ([World Bank Group, 2015](#)). They remain volatile constructs ([Klink, 2014](#)). As we will show in the next section, the state of São Paulo is no exception.

5. Metropolitan regions in the state of São Paulo

The state of São Paulo is the wealthiest and most populous in the Brazilian federation, with an estimated population of over 45 million people, producing, in nominal values, ~31% of the national GDP ([IBGE, 2020](#)). Initiatives of metropolitan governance in the state of São Paulo have been taken on two scales: the Macrometropolis, being a powerful imaginary with low institutional impact, and the nine metropolitan regions ([Figure 2](#)). Details on these two scales will be presented in Sections 5.1 (Macrometropolis) and 5.2 (Metropolitan regions).

Currently, nine metropolitan regions exist, one being the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo (MRSP), with the state capital, the city of São Paulo, being its dominant core. One-third of the state of São Paulo’s municipalities are part of the nine metropolitan regions. [Figure 2](#) shows where these MR are located, when they were established, and how they are organized in terms of territory around the main urban cores and along the main roads. [Figure 2](#) also shows the delimitation of the São Paulo Macrometropolis (SPMM). [Table 1](#) presents the state laws together with the number of municipalities and an estimation of the number of inhabitants for each MR.

The creation of MRSP in 1973 was a result of São Paulo’s early regional planning and development initiatives, together with an accelerated process of dispersed urbanization from the 1950s onwards, both associated with the state’s industrialization. The stepwise move of industrial activities to the hinterlands located beyond the metropolitan limits and the construction of major transportation- and logistics-oriented road axes in the 1960s and 1970s were a consequence of this process ([Lencioni, 1998, 2005](#)). The subsequent consolidation of the capital city as a global center for financial and corporate services followed in the 1990s ([Abdal et al., 2019](#)). The gradual displacement of industrial activities beyond the limits of the metropolis, establishing production centers

along the highways and near the large inland cities, located within a radius of ~150–200 km away from the city of São Paulo coincides even today with the limits of the so-called São Paulo Macrometropolis (SPMM) ([Tavares, 2020](#)).

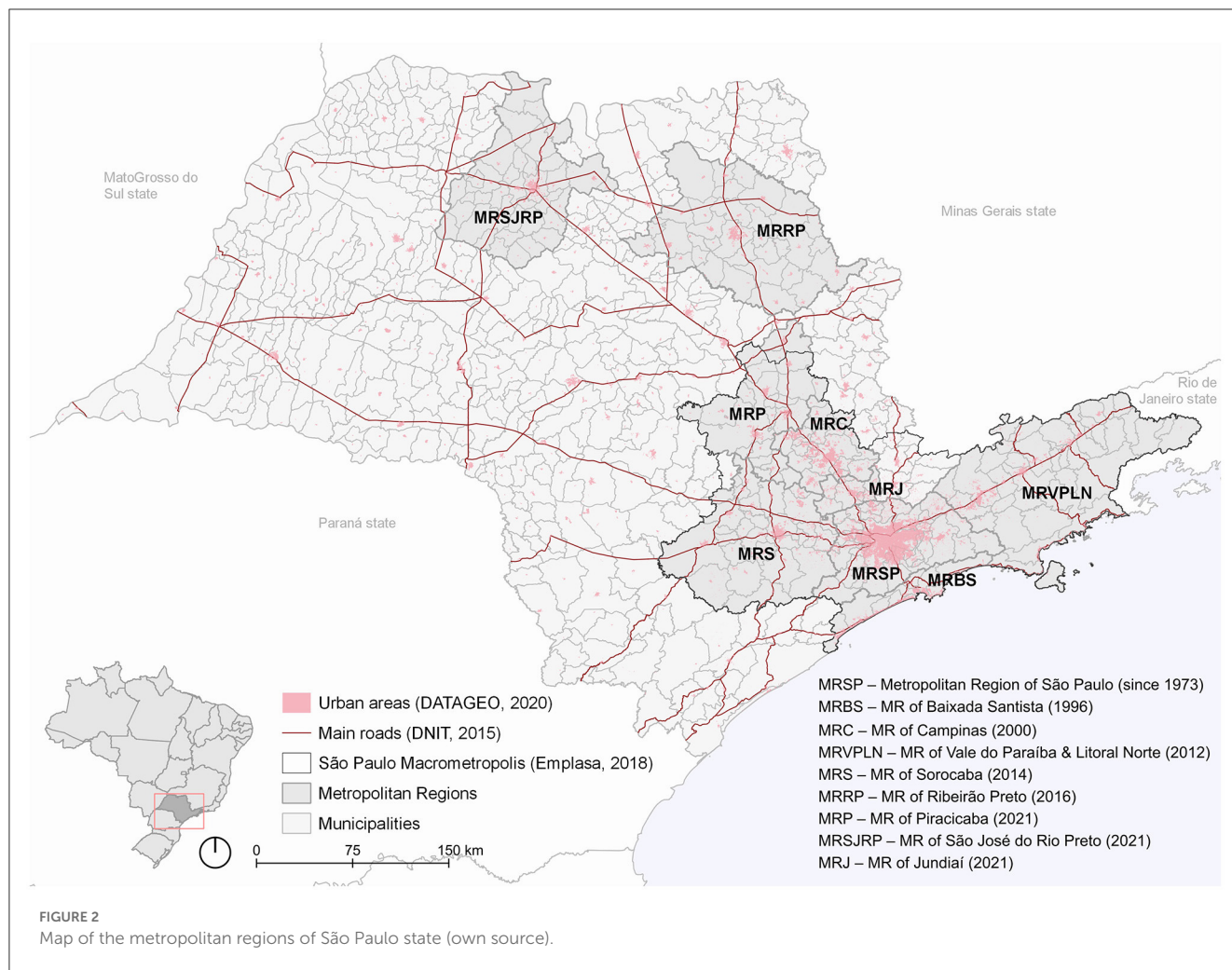
5.1. The failure of governance on a larger scale—The Macrometropolis

Located in the southeastern part of the state, the Macrometropolis comprises a territory of ~50,000 km², corresponding to 20% of the state territory. In 2010, SPMM concentrated over 73% of the state’s total population, about 50% of its urbanized area, and 27.3% of the Brazilian GDP ([EMPLASA, 2015](#)). It has an intricate network of infrastructure, logistic facilities, and industrial and technological parks. It has 22 airports and two ports, with the port of Santos being the largest in Latin America ([de Hilsdorf and de Nogueira Neto, 2015](#); [Pasternak and Bógus, 2019](#)). Thus, it can be understood as an urban-regional phenomenon of high territorial complexity, “defined by the relations of physical and functional integration of spatial units, to which correspond economic and population flows derived from regional specificities and functionalities” ([EMPLASA, 2014a](#), p. 10, own translation).

According to [Tavares \(2018\)](#), the notion of the SPMM has a double meaning: one as a theoretical or conceptual object and another as a delimitation for an effective functional region and scale of planning. In terms of theory, the notion of “Macrometropolis” is well-established in the Brazilian literature specialized in regionalization, urban studies, and economic geography, dating back at least to the 1980s ([Lencioni, 2005](#)). More recently, it has become an object of investigation with a multi- and transdisciplinary character, seeing the macrometropolis as a socio-environmental system ([Torres et al., 2019](#); [Frey et al., 2020](#); [Jacobi and Giatti, 2021](#); [Jacobi et al., 2022](#)). In terms of its institutionalization, although there are mentions of the macrometropolis since the late 1980s in official documents, the term was adopted in relation to sectoral programs and policies, i.e., it was not used in comprehensive, intersectoral plans ([Tavares, 2020](#)).

Only in the last decade, the São Paulo state government adopted this larger scale as a planning region ([Torres et al., 2020](#)). This adoption was articulated by the creation of the Master Plan for the Use of Water Resources for the São Paulo Macrometropolis, elaborated by DAEE—Department of Water and Power in 2013—and the Macrometropolis Action Plan (MAP), elaborated by EMPLASA—São Paulo Metropolitan Planning Company S/A in 2014. Although with discrete differences in terms of the exact territorial delimitation—the DAEE plan considers 180 municipalities and the EMPLASA plan 172—both start from the Macrometropolitan scale for the planning, implementation, and execution of policies and investments.

The MAP has a more comprehensive character. The plan was structured around the recognition of the need to “promote the integrated development of metropolitan regions” and the “pressing need to adopt a strategy capable of combining territorial and inclusive development” ([EMPLASA, 2014a](#), p. 11, own translation). Thus, in launching this strategy, the state government’s vision



was to ensure a “single, diverse, polycentric, compact and lively” Macrometropolis (EMPLASA, 2014a).

To this end, EMPLASA structured the Macrometrópole Action Plan around two articulating concepts: strategic axes and development vectors (EMPLASA, 2014a,b). The strategic axes refer to key ideas that guide actions and proposals, i.e., thematic guidelines, while the development vectors refer to areas of intervention, i.e., territorial delimitations. Finally, the feasibility of the strategic axes to be developed in conjunction with the vectors would be given using the so-called project portfolio, a set of instruments and proposals for investments to be implemented in these specific territories. Table 2 schematizes both the strategic axes and the development vectors, as presented in the plan.

With regard to the ways of coordinating actions and projects, MAP proposed a governance structure that, in principle, would aim at the formation of political consensus and accountability of the process (but never reached a full state of implementation). To this end, two arenas for dialogic policy-making were suggested, both having the potential of involving a plurality of governmental actors from different levels and non-governmental actors from civil society, as schematized in Figure 3.

On the macro-metropolitan scale, the creation of the MAP Management Committee was foreseen, a function to be performed

by the Metropolitan Development Chamber. This chamber was composed of state government secretaries, directly subordinated to the governor’s office, centralizing the structuring, implementation, and follow-up activities of the plan’s actions, as well as the interaction with the federal government. The function of the executive secretary of this committee was reserved for EMPLASA, which would guarantee the straight execution of the decisions. Finally, this body would house the MAP Working Group, made up exclusively of sectoral government representatives, and the MAP Thematic Working Groups, made up of representatives from the government and civil society, such as professional associations, academia, and the private sector, both groups playing a role similar to advisory chambers (EMPLASA, 2014b).

On the sub-regional scale, the creation of special chambers of the MAP was foreseen to be implemented in common agreement with the development councils of the metropolitan regions (see below), aiming at the follow-up of implementations in terms of prioritization of actions of the project portfolio. The special chambers would be composed of representatives of the mayors’ offices of the municipalities of the metropolitan region in question, as well as representatives of other established territorial governance arrangements, such as inter-municipal public consortia, in addition to organized civil society initiatives. Technical support for these

TABLE 1 Metropolitan regions of São Paulo state.

Metropolitan region (MR)	Institucionalization date	Policy	Number of municipalities	Inhabitants
MR of São Paulo	08/06/1973	Federal law nu. 14/1973	39	22,048,504
MR of Baixada Santista	30/07/1996	State law nu. 815/1996	9	1,897,551
MR of Campinas	19/06/2000	State law nu. 870/2000	19	3,342,707
MR of Vale do Paraíba and Litoral Norte	09/01/2012	State law nu. 1.166/2012	39	2,599,218
MR of Sorocaba	09/05/2014	State law nu. 1.241/2014	27	2,120,095
MR of Ribeirão Preto	06/07/2016	State law nu. 1.290/2016	34	1,755,029
MR of Piracicaba	10/08/2021	State law nu. 1.360/2021	24	1,537,819
MR of São José do Rio Preto	25/08/2021	State law nu. 1.359/2021	37	918,000
MR of Jundiaí	30/11/2021	State law nu. 1.362/2021	7	835,251

TABLE 2 Strategic axes and development vectors—MAP.

Strategic axes	
Territorial connectivity and economic competitiveness	<i>Attributes of territorial connectivity defined in terms of infrastructure and logistics conditions, as well as the configuration of the business environment (concentration of firms)</i>
Territorial cohesion and inclusive urbanization	<i>Attributes related to territorial development, quality of life, inclusive urbanization, and sustainable development</i>
Metropolitan governance	<i>Attributes needed for political-institutional adequacy, formulation, implementation and monitoring of public policies and accountability systems</i>
Development vectors—DV	
Territorial vectors: <i>Connections that perform specific functions at the intermetropolitan level</i>	DV Metropolitan Region of São Paulo
	DV Vale do Paraíba
	DV Caminho do Mar
	DV Bandeirantes
	DV Sorocaba
	DV perimetral
Systemic vectors: <i>Set of natural resources or technical systems</i>	Water resources and sanitation
	Environmental development
	Energy system
	Technological innovation, labor qualification, and fiscal management
	Housing development

Based on [EMPLASA \(2014b\)](#).

collective actors would then be provided by the metropolitan agencies or by local EEMPLASA representatives ([EMPLASA, 2014b](#)).

Even though MAP is a comprehensive plan, some fragilities emerged in its implementation process. The first concerns the allocation of the investments foreseen in its project portfolio. According to the detailed analysis produced by [Torres et al. \(2020\)](#), the amounts to be invested in the projects and actions, which have an execution period extending until 2040, are estimated at ~R\$ 254 billion, to be distributed in all six territorial vectors. However, the “maintenance of investment and priority inequalities by region” ([Torres et al., 2020](#), p. 111) is evident, considering that the MRSP vector alone concentrates 67% of the total investments. These figures support the conclusion drawn by [Tavares \(2020\)](#), who states that the distribution of funds does not follow the idea

of polycentricity (or balanced territorial development) but rather shows a preference for São Paulo and its metropolitan region.

Second, there are difficulties in the political-institutional field, marked by discrepancies and disagreements with regard to the legal frameworks as well as uneven processes that influenced the constitution of the metropolitan regions of the state of São Paulo (see details below).

Finally, there was a process of political rupture that explains the current state of failure or abandonment of the SPMM as a planning region, starting with the unexpected extinction of EEMPLASA in 2019. The MAP was elaborated during Geraldo Alckmin’s mandate as state governor and his replacement by João Dória, of the same party (Brazilian Social Democracy Party), which represented a rupture in the political management model. The extinction of

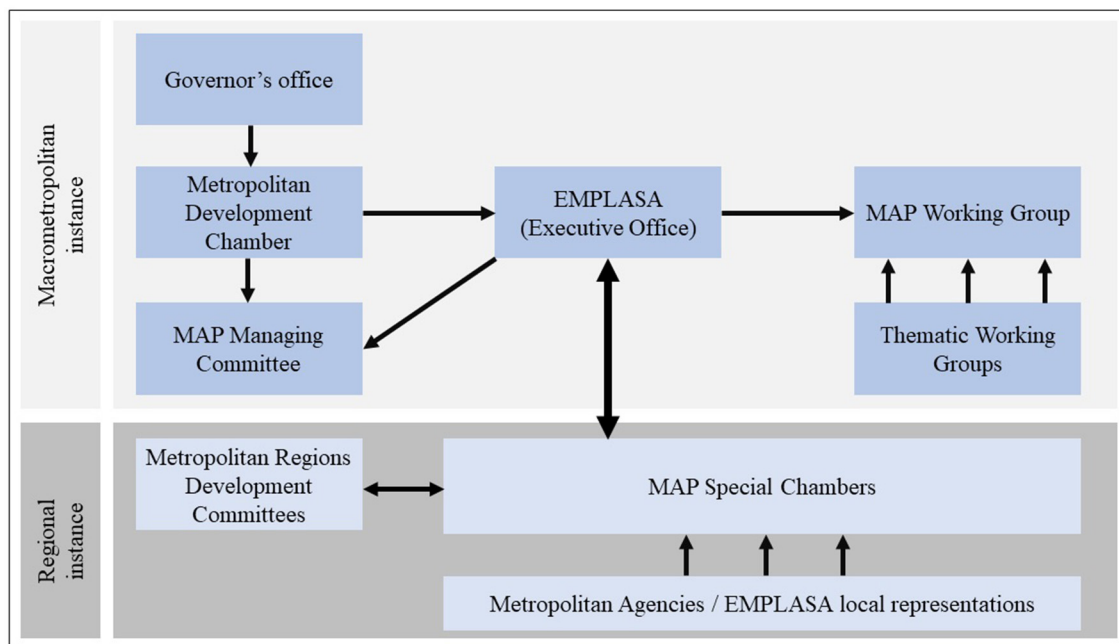


FIGURE 3
Macrometropolis Action Plan (MAP)—Suggested Governance Structure (own source based on [EMPLASA, 2014b](#)).

EMPLASA, the reallocation of its technicians and dismantling of its assets, and the radical reduction of almost half of MAP investments in the state public budget, led to a state of uncertainty and paralysis of the initiatives proposed in the plan.

EMPLASA was extinguished together with other public enterprises in the context of the official state program of dismantling public administration in mid-2019, after acting for more than four decades as the main support agency in metropolitan planning in the state of São Paulo, a period in which it accumulated, in addition to an extensive documentary collection, a considerable technical capacity through its servers. The rationale of the Bill Project 01/2019, the very first one presented by then-governor João Dória, later endorsed by the legislative assembly and turned into Law 17.056, was the need for rationalization of the state's performance and more efficiency in the allocation of public resources. The liquidation of EEMPLASA was widely criticized by the expert community, pointing to the loss of installed capacity in exchange for a negligible reduction in public spending. As pointed out by the former president of EEMPLASA, “in times of fiscal crisis, the logic that prevails is that of the short term and under this aspect, planning loses centrality in the government agenda” ([Campagnone, 2019](#), p. 203, own translation).

5.2. Metropolitan governance on a lower scale: the metropolitan regions

The metropolitan regions (MR) have been mentioned in the previous section as being an element of the Macrometropolis Action Plan to promote integrated development ([Figure 3](#)). It would, however, be misleading to consider these scales as a

functional element of a well-designed multi-level governance system. In practice, the MAP could not achieve this goal and the MR have a minor role in the governance system. However, different from the SPM, the metropolitan regions are institutionalized by law with a formalized structure.

The MR of São Paulo, with 39 municipalities including the state capital, was institutionalized by the federal government in 1973 (federal law no. 14) during the military regime. As has been mentioned in Section 4, this federal law established, besides São Paulo, another eight MR all over Brazil (around the state capital of Belo Horizonte (Minas Gerais), Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul), Recife (Pernambuco), Salvador (Bahia), Curitiba (Paraná), Belém (Pará), and e Fortaleza (Ceará)). The state government of São Paulo, through state law no. 94, from May 1974, and decree no. 6.111 from May 1975, created and implemented a metropolitan administration and planning system composed of the following:

- a consultative unit, the Conselho Consultivo Metropolitano de Desenvolvimento Integrado da Grande São Paulo—CONSULTI (Metropolitan Consultative Council for Integrated Development of Greater São Paulo);
- a deliberative and decision-making body, the Conselho Deliberativo da Grande São Paulo—CODEGRAN (Deliberative Council of Greater São Paulo);
- a coordinating and operating unit, the Secretaria de Estado dos Negócios Metropolitanos (State Secretary of Metropolitan Affairs);
- a technical and executive unit, the Empresa Metropolitana de Planejamento da Grande São Paulo S.A.—EMPLASA (Metropolitan Planning Company of Greater São Paulo S.A.); and

- a financing unit, the Fundo Metropolitano de Financiamento e Investimento—FUMEFI (Metropolitan Financing and Investment Fund).

The other MR of the state of São Paulo (Table 1) were all established by the state starting from the mid-1990s (after the fall of the military regime), although according to Diba (2004), the initiatives for establishing the MR of Baixada Santista (MRBS) dated back to 1959, led by Santos' mayor. In this region, over the years, various actors, such as mayors, deputies, local representatives, and even the EMPLASA and the state government, had made several attempts to strengthen metropolitan collaboration but there was no success. Even before the institutionalization of MRBS, in 1992, the mayors of nine municipalities in the region decided on some common issues to tackle. For that purpose, the *Secretaria Extraordinária de Assuntos Metropolitanos* (Extraordinary Secretariat for Metropolitan Affairs) and *Coordenadoria Regional de Metropolização* (Regional Metropolitanization Coordination) were informally created. This bottom-up process urged the São Paulo State Government to accelerate the process of metropolitan institution building. The law approved in July 1996 was prepared by the state government and the nine municipalities. Only after 3 years of the MRBS creation, the Agência Metropolitana — AGEM (Metropolitan Agency) was institutionalized. An agency without which the MR could not use the state Development Fund and the Conselho de Desenvolvimento da Baixada Santista—CONDESB (Development Council of Baixada Santista) could not plan and develop projects. The agencies are *autarquias* (in Portuguese), public bodies created by specific law with the purpose of debureaucratization and more autonomy for different implementation functions such as budget executions, new contracts, and workforce improvement. The *autarquias* are in use in each of the three tiers of the Brazilian government and are the result of new public management thinking.

Originally, AGEM was linked to the *Secretaria Estadual de Transportes Metropolitanos* (State Secretariat of Metropolitan Transportation), but since 2019, it is affiliated with the *Secretaria do Desenvolvimento Regional* (Secretariat of Regional Development) of the state government (Figure 4).

Campinas followed a similar path as Baixada Santista. According to Diba (2004), mayors from the region started to discuss metropolitan policies in the early 1990s and this was triggered by regional problems in fields such as transportation, health, and sanitation. The main dispute regarding the institutionalization of this MR, as it happened in MRBS, was about greater regional autonomy vs. the decision-making power of the state government. In the end, the bill that institutionalized the MR of Campinas (MRC) was presented by the state government and approved by the chamber of deputies with several amendments (Complementary Law No. 870 of 19 June 2000). The decree installing the development council was signed only in January 2001. The development council of the MRC approved the creation of the metropolitan agency (Agemcamp) and the draft of the decree for the creation of the Metropolitan Development Fund in July 2002. The latter was established as a state agency (an *autarquia*) by the governor by Complementary Law no. 946 on 23 September 2003. Initially, the MRC was linked to the Secretary

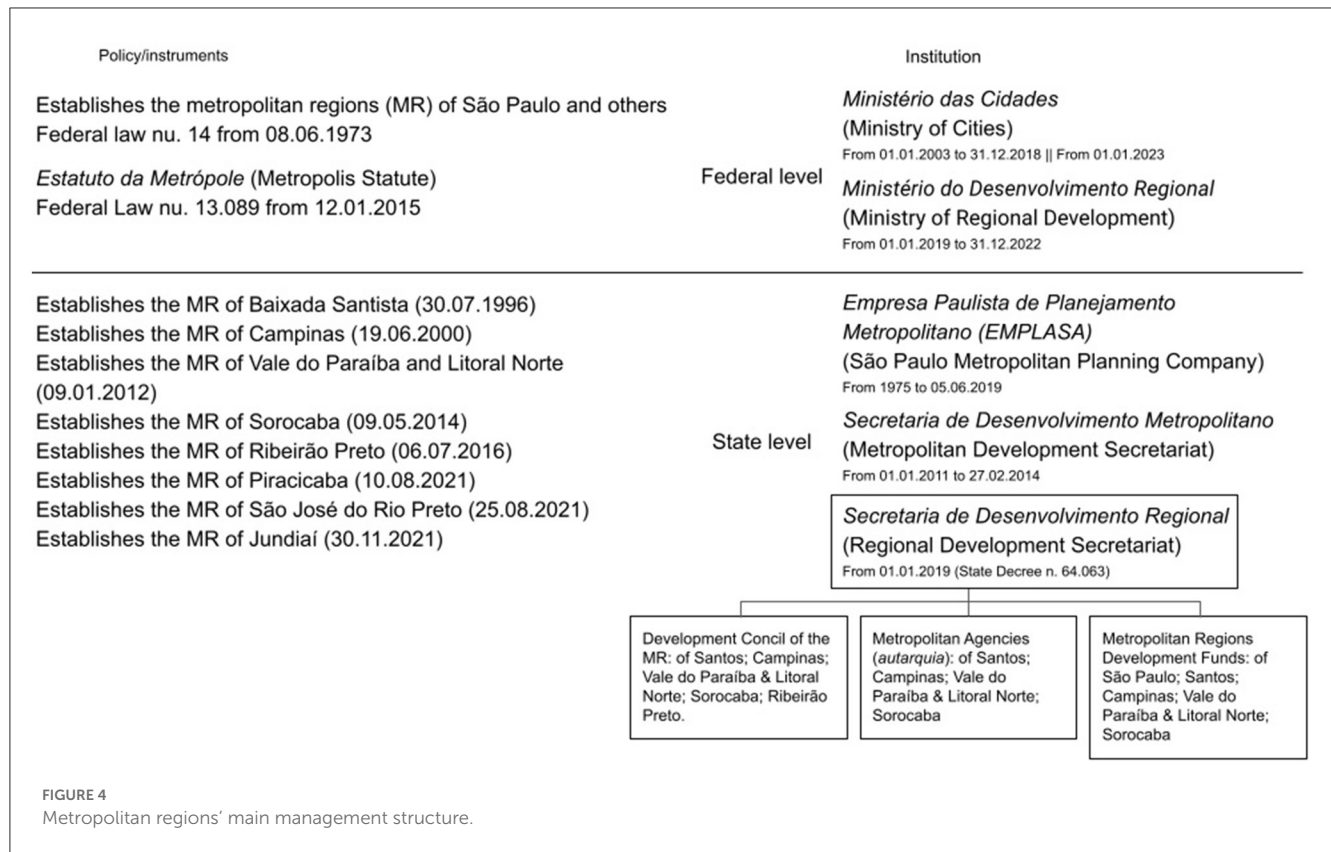
of Metropolitan Transportation, and consequently, most of the actions and resources were destined for this area. Currently, as with the others, the Agemcamp is linked to the Secretariat of Regional Development.

Despite the bottom-up movements in the process of constituting these two MR, the state government was in contention to take a stronger role and this was pointed out as a problem by local leaders in the previous processes. During the establishment of the MR that followed, the centrality of the state government stood out. Referring to the works of Scaquetti et al. (2021) and Santana-Chaves et al. (2021) about the MR of Vale do Paraíba and Litoral Norte (MRVPLN) and MR of Sorocaba (MRS), respectively, we see that the institutionalizations of both MR happened in the same way. In both cases, at first, projects were presented and developed by actors from the local or regional scale, being in favor of local interests and autonomy, but in the end, they were not approved. The proposals implemented were presented by the state government, based on legal and technical studies by EMPLASA, following the legal structure of the other MR in the state. This emphasizes a model that follows a technocratic, top-down, and exclusionary logic of participation. For the MRVPLN, the first legislative proposal was made in 2001 and the MR was institutionalized by state law no. 1.166 on 9 January 2012. For the MRS, the first proposition was made in 2005 and the MR was institutionalized by state law no. 1.241 on 9 May 2014. In both regions, the main reasons for this long and cumbersome process were, according to Scaquetti et al. (2021) and Santana-Chaves et al. (2021), financial (the lack of funds), political-administrative (difficulties in the participation and involvement of the mayors), and political-ideological issues. Looking at the overall institutional arrangement supporting the governance of the two MR, each of them has a development council, of a deliberative nature, a metropolitan agency, AGEMVALE in MRVPLN and AGEM-Sorocaba in MRS, and a Metropolitan Development Fund. The two agencies were created in 2015 and are linked to the Secretariat of Regional Development of the state of São Paulo.

Together with the MR of Ribeirão Preto (MRRP), MRVPLN, and MRS were established by the same Governor, Geraldo Alckmin, between 2014 and 2016. Note that the three laws that regulate these MR have the same structure, with most of the text being identical. In all of them, the equal participation of the municipalities in relation to the state in the development council, which had been the object of dispute in the previous MR processes, is guaranteed. The MRRP is structured exactly like the previous ones, but its development agency has not yet been established by decree.

The last three MR of the state, the MR of Piracicaba (MRP), MR of São José do Rio Preto (MRSJRP), and MR of Jundiaí (MRJ), were all created in 2021 and institutionalized by Governor João Dória, who follows a neoliberal agenda. All three laws that established these MR also have most of the texts identical and follow the basic structure of the three before them. They all have the same five goals (Article 2 in all six statutes):

1. regional planning for socioeconomic development and the improvement of quality of life;
2. the cooperation between different governmental levels, through decentralization, articulation, and integration of its



organs and entities of the direct and indirect administration acting in the region, aiming at maximum use of public resources destined for it;

3. the rational use of the territory, natural and cultural resources, and environmental protection, by controlling public and private enterprises in the region;
4. the integration of planning and execution of public functions of common interest by public entities operating in the region;
5. the reduction of regional inequalities.

(Note: For the MRVPLN, there is a slight difference on item 3: “the rational use of the territory, natural resources, and the protection of the environment, material and immaterial cultural assets”).

The scope of activities of the development councils of the MR is also defined in the statute. The statute stipulates that the development council shall specify the public functions of common interest of the state and the municipalities in the respective metropolitan region in the following areas of action:

1. planning and land use
2. transportation and regional road system
3. housing
4. environmental sanitation
5. environment
6. economic development
7. social services
8. sports and leisure
9. agriculture

10. tourism.

(Note: For the MRVPLN, there is an amendment: 9: agriculture and agribusiness. For the MRVPLN and MRS, there is a slight difference on “8 - sports, leisure and culture”).

The MRP, MRSJRP, and MRJ are also structured exactly like the previous ones, with a development council, as a decision-making body, a metropolitan agency, and a metropolitan development fund, but their metropolitan agencies have not yet been established by decree.

Figure 4 summarizes the legislation and main organizational structure of metropolitan regions, with emphasis on the São Paulo state. At the federal level, the MRSP was established in the period of military dictatorship (1973). Years after the creation of the *Ministério das Cidades* (ministry of cities) in 2003, the *Estatuto da Metrópole* (metropolis statute) was published by the federal government in 2015, with guidelines for the organization and governance for MR.

In the São Paulo state administration, the responsibility for the MR changed over time. The metropolitan development secretariat lasted <4 years (from 2011 to 2014). Since 2019, the regional development secretariat is in charge of metropolitan issues. The secretariat is responsible for the agencies of the MR of Santos, Campinas, Vale do Paraíba and Litoral Norte, and Sorocaba. The metropolitan regions established after these (MR Ribeirão Preto, MR Piracicaba, MR São José do Rio Preto, and MR Jundiaí) do not have a metropolitan agency or a fund established by decree yet. The development council of the MR is part of the secretariat’s basic structure too, but because the decree is from 1 January 2019, there

is no mention of the São José do Rio Preto region, and the regions of Piracicaba and Jundiaí appear as Urban Agglomeration.

The regional development secretariat developed an online platform² with information about all PDUIs but none of the MR have a PDUI established by law. We noticed that the metropolitan regions started a process of meetings and public consultation, but with a slight difference between the MR of São Paulo, Santos, Campinas, Sorocaba and the others, MR of Vale do Paraíba and Litoral Norte, Ribeirão Preto, Piracicaba, São José do Rio Preto, and Jundiaí. While the former had many meetings and workshops to develop their PDUI over the years, basically since the creation of the metropolis statute, the draft PDUI for the others was elaborated in 17 months³ by a multidisciplinary technical team from *Fundação Instituto de Pesquisas Econômicas*—Fipe (Institute for Economic Research Foundation)—hired by the secretariat of regional development. This suggests that there is one team in charge of the elaboration of at least most of the plans, indicating a more top-down relationship with the municipalities. Even though regional workshops and meetings are taking place, the structure of the elaboration of the PDUI follows a ready-made format.

6. Conclusion

The well-established theoretical heuristic of the metropolitan reform position, public choice, and new regionalism is hardly of any value in the case of Brazil and São Paulo, in particular. During the 1970s, when European city regions experienced a considerable process of institutional consolidation, a military regime created metropolitan regions in Brazil but the goals and implementation are hardly comparable with the practice in Europe in that period. The period of the new regionalism did not find any repercussions in Brazil. The emergence of new organizational forms for regional collaboration, such as networks and partnerships and the opening of governance for public and private actors in the 1990s and early 2000s, is not observable in Brazil. Nevertheless, metropolitan governance in Brazil is a salient political issue that unfolds in a context of decentralization and political polarization with neoliberal positions being powerful in the political discourse. The institutionalization of metropolitan regions in Brazil is largely the result of top-down initiatives of the state governments with low local responsiveness. The initiatives of the state governments often do not meet the expectations of local governments. At least some local governments—as has been shown—feel prepared to cooperate voluntarily [see cases of MR of Baixada Santista (MRBS) and MR of Campinas (MRC)]. The widespread use of public consortia confirms this willingness to cooperate (Slack, 2019). Although the legal framework provides for institutional solutions, the processes of institutionalization of MR were lengthy and cumbersome and the same applies to the elaboration of the plans (PDUI) once the MR came into existence. The statute of the metropolis was an attempt to give a clearer functional profile and justification to metropolitan regions but the tasks of the metropolitan regions are defined only vaguely and there is a lack of funding, instruments, and capacity. Moreover, although the instruments are envisaged based

on the Public Function of Common Interest, in practice, neoliberal political orientations corrupt the functionality of people-oriented governance and private interests prevail, just like in many other examples, regarding the general tendency of urban governance in the Brazilian context (Cabral de Souza et al., 2020).

The state of São Paulo—as well as other states—would argue that they support regionalization by the creation of MR but, as has been shown, the institutionalized MR operates in a political and institutional vacuum. The fact that most of the decrees of the MR follow the same template confirms this. This preference for “one size fits all solutions” speaks against the plea for context-based solutions in the scholarly debate on metropolitan governance. In addition, there are frequent changes with every new state government and politicization tends to be high on all levels of government.

We can say that MR in Brazil and in the state of São Paulo, in particular,

- largely have a development function,
- suffer from institutional weakness and low political support,
- are designed for comprehensive and integrated policies but there is an implementation gap,
- represent a “would be” metropolitan governance arrangement with an unclear mission, and
- are in competition with state agencies and strong sectoral policies, which often do not even coincide territorially with the geographic boundaries of the MR (water and sanitation, and transport).

The reason for this situation is as follows:

- a lack of constructive interaction between governing levels (federal and state levels, in particular),
- high transaction costs for establishing metropolitan regions that are the result of political competition (Abrucio et al., 2010), and
- the lack of a positive narrative that demonstrates that power-sharing and burden-sharing in metropolitan regions will have a collective benefit.

Lefèvre’s discussion of the governance of megacity regions focuses on the presence of a collective actor—that is, however, absent in most megacity regions (Lefèvre, 2020). In the case of São Paulo, such a collective actor does not exist and even EMPLASA, the planning agency that was abolished in 2019 after almost 45 years of existence did not fulfill the role of a coordinating actor but was more a technical agency. The so-called São Paulo Macrometropolis gives a name (and powerful imagination) to a large-scale agglomeration but, in terms of institutions, it does not exist. We rather observe an emerging polycentric and coevolutionary governance structure with several metropolitan regions that have been established since 1996. Between 2010 and 2021, some new metropolitan regions have been created in the state of São Paulo and this can be considered an effect of the federal statute of the metropolis that has been discussed in this period and decided upon in 2015. In terms of institutional strength and governmental support, however, the capacity of these metropolitan regions is rather low. In addition,

2 <https://pdui.sp.gov.br/> (accessed January 14, 2023).

3 <https://rmj.pdui.sp.gov.br/?p=1691> (accessed January 14, 2023).

as quite a few public services are coordinated and implemented by state agencies and secretariats, the issue of multi-level governance emerges. Hence, the focus on a collective actor is misleading in the context of greater São Paulo. We would rather suggest emphasizing the relevance of inter-governmental relationships and networked governance. We also want to point out that institutional change in a post-colonial context may follow different trajectories when compared to advanced political economies (Streck and Thelen, 2005; Mahoney, 2010). This points to shortcomings of institutional theory and calls for fresh perspectives. As Schipper and Gerrits have demonstrated with reference to the case of the Amsterdam city region, complexity theory and theories of coevolutionary decision-making are powerful conceptual tools (Schipper and Gerrits, 2015).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

KZ, AL, and MK contributed to the conception and design of the study. KZ wrote the drafts for Sections 1, 2, and 5. AL and MK wrote the draft for Sections 3 and 4. All authors contributed to the manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

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