Introduction: The Idea and the Aim of this Book

In a time when traditional decisional procedures are being put into question and the pressure for more participatory processes is increasing, federalism gains momentum as an inclusive, democratic and (more) transparent governance tool. The idea to consider federalism not only as an organizational principle of statehood but also as an adaptable tool for addressing specific decision-making challenges surfaced about ten years ago, when the team of the Institute for Studies on Federalism and Regionalism of the European Academy of Bolzano/Bozen (EURAC) was elaborating future research trajectories. We realized that challenges in regulating institutional pluralism require us to review some of the established approaches to federalism and to re-think the interplay of all components of decision-making processes.

In our estimation, closer attention must be paid to issues such as how decisions are made and how they can be made in a more effective and democratic manner in an interconnected world. At the present time, the challenge is less the question of how to divide the spheres of government but more how to better connect them by also involving actors that have been excluded in traditional decision-making procedures since their claims are not channeled through institutional representation. By acknowledging and adequately taking into account different societal claims for more articulated and inclusive decision-making processes, federalism as a set of interlocking spheres in continuous transformation, each with its own structures, procedures and policies, can be a key factor to ensure better governance and higher public responsiveness to policy. Against this backdrop, we decided to bring scholars together and exchange views on how federalism can provide answers to current challenges in decision-making. Scholars from a variety of disciplines engaged in debates on the changing frameworks and nature of governance networks, especially from the perspective of subnational entities that often serve as institutional and societal laboratories.

The volume largely originates from papers presented at the international conference “Federalism as Decision-Making: Changes in Structures, Procedures and Policies” held between 11–13 September 2013 in the Italian Autonomous Province of Bolzano/Bozen (South Tyrol). Early on, the International Association of Centers for Federal Studies (IACFS) welcomed and agreed to support the idea of organizing a conference around the question of whether federalism as a pragmatic and adaptable governance tool could provide answers to current challenges in terms of inclusiveness of decisions, institutional
innovation, and experimentation. Presenters at the conference rose to the challenge by re-appraising theoretical frameworks and proffering single (comparative) case studies, both on various countries and policies. Their responses and observations are collected in this volume. Additionally, we invited some leading scholars to contribute to this collection, who – due to time constraints – were unable to present at the conference itself.

The goals of this publication are threefold: first, the volume will contribute to the re-consideration of the theoretical frameworks of federalism, democracy, and governance, and their interplay; second, it will provide case studies on how mechanisms and procedures of cooperation and coordination among and between governmental levels and the different institutional and societal actors that push for more participation are changing in contemporary (federal) societies; third, the volume intends to add to the establishment of a ‘toolbox’ of federal approaches to specific policies and offers case studies on subnational institutional innovation and participatory democracy.

The book refers both to classical federal models and to regional and devolved countries. Part one ‘federalism, democracy and governance’ explores theoretical considerations with regard to the multinational approach to federalism, the interface between federalism and democracy exemplified in the Australian case, and political identities as well as coercive federalism in the US context. Against the backdrop of the transformation of the executive and administrative branches of government vis-à-vis the fragmentation and impairment of traditional democratic bonds and political circuits, this thematic field seeks to provide (re)newed considerations of the origins of federal philosophy and principles.

Part two of the volume is devoted to ‘participation mechanisms and procedures’, encompassing both ‘asymmetries and identities’ (in African States, the United Kingdom, India and Russia) and current challenges in ‘intergovernmental relations’ as epitomized via references to various policy fields (case studies on Spain, Australia, Germany and Argentina). The more complex the landscape of multilevel governance, the more necessary become procedural mechanisms to foster cooperation and coordination among different levels of government, as well as between institutional and non-institutional actors.

Part three – entitled ‘policy areas compared’ – offers an account of how federalism as decision-making plays out in diverse policy fields. Comparative case studies engage in trans-disciplinary analyses of federal approaches to certain policies. More specifically, the chapters present analyses with regard to immigration, environmental protection, national development plans, benchmarking of public services, public security, regional development agencies, as well as decentralization and economic growth. The cases offer comparisons of