Bureaucratic overload and organizational policy triage: A comparative study of implementation agencies in five European countries

Dionys Zink 🔾

Geschwister-Scholl-Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Munich, Germany

Christoph Knill 🔾

Geschwister-Scholl-Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Lehrstuhl für Empirische Theorien der Politik, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Munich, Germany

Yves Steinebach

Institutt for Statsvitenskap, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

Abstract

Research on policy implementation traditionally has focused on understanding the success or failure of individual policies within specific contexts. Little attention has been given to the challenges that emerge from the cumulative growth of policy portfolios over time. This paper is addressing this research gap by examining the phenomenon of organizational policy triage, which occurs when implementation organizations face overload and are forced to make trade-off decisions between the implementation of the different policies in their portfolios. We investigate empirical patterns of policy triage across 16 social and environmental implementation agencies in five European countries (Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and UK). We show that variation in policy triage can be explained by the combination of three central factors: blame-shifting opportunities, the mobilization of external resources, and the commitment to compensate for overload by implementation authorities.

Keywords: bureaucratic overload, implementation, public administration, public policy.

1. Introduction

Policy implementation is a difficult and complex task, and the complete, timely, and smooth transposition and practical application of policies in line with initially defined objectives is subject to various challenges. The latter have been analyzed by several waves of implementation research inspired by Pressman and Wildavsky's (1984) ground-breaking work. As a result, we know a lot about the implementation of specific policies in a given setting that has been more or less successful. We also know a lot on the important role of street-level bureaucrats whose entrepreneurship and discretion plays a crucial role in matching policy requirements with local needs (Cohen & Aviram, 2021; Lowi, 1964).

The strong orientation on often case-study based assessments of individual policies, however, implies that implementation research has missed the forest for the trees; that is, it has not developed analytical sensors to capture implementation challenges that emerge beyond the adoption of individual policies, but from aggregate patterns of policy change. In this regard, a particular challenge results from patterns of policy growth or policy accumulation that have been identified as a ubiquitous phenomenon in modern democracies (Adam et al., 2019).

The fact that sectoral policy portfolios continuously are growing over time poses a novel—so far unexplored challenge—for policy implementation. As more policies generally translate into an implementation burden, there is the risk of a structural overload of implementation bodies if policy growth is not matched with corresponding

expansions of administrative capacities. Consequently, implementation organizations might find themselves unable to handle all of their mandated tasks effectively, implying that not only the respective organization's implementation performance is affected negatively but also the overall sectoral performance might suffer.

The implementation problems potentially resulting from such overload scenarios have been described as organizational policy triage (Knill et al., 2023). This concept captures the fact that overburdened organizations are de facto forced to resort to trade-offs in decisions of various kind when carrying out their implementation tasks. The more such trade-offs have to be made, the worse the implementation performance of the respective organization appears to be. Even though these challenges and resulting policy triage are well-acknowledged in the recent literature (Adam et al., 2019; Knill et al., 2020, 2023), we still have limited knowledge about the extent to which these patterns vary across sectoral and national organizations and why this is the case. While the exploration of organizational structures holds a prominent place in implementation research (Sabatier, 1986), the central discourse in this realm ponders about whether public policies primarily manifest through a "single lonely organization" (Peters, 2014, p. 132) or necessitate a "multiorganizational analytic perspective" for a comprehensive grasp of the implementation process (Hall & O'Toole, 2000; Hjern & Porter, 1981, p. 201). The prevailing organizational perspective has predominantly concentrated on delineating and mapping the entities involved in policy implementation, monitoring changes in their composition over time. However, this emphasis has overlooked a fundamental question: how do individual organizations address the challenge of overload and cope with the complexities arising from simultaneous implementation of multiple policies?

In this paper, we address this research gap. We study the organizational policy triage in five European countries (Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and UK) across the sectors of social and environmental policy. To account for empirical variation in triage patterns, we depart from the assumption that the extent to which implementation bodies resort to policy triage results from the configuration and interplay of various factors at the national, sectoral, and organizational level. In view of this constellation, our underlying approach is essentially explorative in nature. We build on a theoretical interpretation of empirical variation that relies on the combination of different causal factors. The latter include (1) blame-shifting opportunities for central policymakers; (2) the implementation authorities' opportunities to mobilize external resources; and (3) the extent to which implementation authorities are committed to compensate for overload.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: We begin with a brief discussion of the phenomenon of policy growth in order to substantiate the main point of analytical departure of this study (Section 2). In Section 3, we provide an empirical mapping of policy triage in the organizations under study and identify patterns of variation across countries and sectors. In Section 4, we discuss potential theoretical explanations for the empirical patterns observed and analyze the impact of different combinations of causal factors. Section 5 concludes.

2. Policy growth and challenges for policy implementation

The phenomenon of policy growth has been described and captured from different analytical angles, including the concepts of "policy accumulation" (Adam et al., 2019), "rule growth" (Jakobsen & Mortensen, 2015), "policy layering" (Daugbjerg & Swinbank, 2016), "policyscapes" (Mettler, 2016), or "legislative growth" (Kosti & Levi-Faur, 2019). Although these concepts display important differences in their analytical focus, they all observe that governments effectively adopt more rules and policies over time than they abolish.

Research has identified various drivers and factors affecting patterns of policy growth. Policy growth is not only driven by vote-seeking politicians who aim to demonstrate their responsiveness to public and interest group demands by addressing the challenges citizens care about (Gratton et al., 2021). Moreover, policies are also governments' main problem-solving tool because they allow them to deal "with issues and problems as they arise" (Orren & Skowronek, 2017, p. 3). However, while there are strong political incentives to produce new policies, it is hardly rewarding politically to dismantle existing policies, even when they have turned out to be ineffective (Bauer et al., 2012; Knill et al., 2020). Political incentive structures, therefore, result in governments typically adopting more policies than they eliminate over time, regardless of the policy sector in question.

In order to measure policy growth, we conceive of a policy as a combination of a target (i.e., NOx emission; long-term unemployment) and an instrument that addresses this target (i.e., a ban; a means-tested benefit). Figures 1 and 2 provide an empirical impression of the dynamics of policy growth over a period of more than four
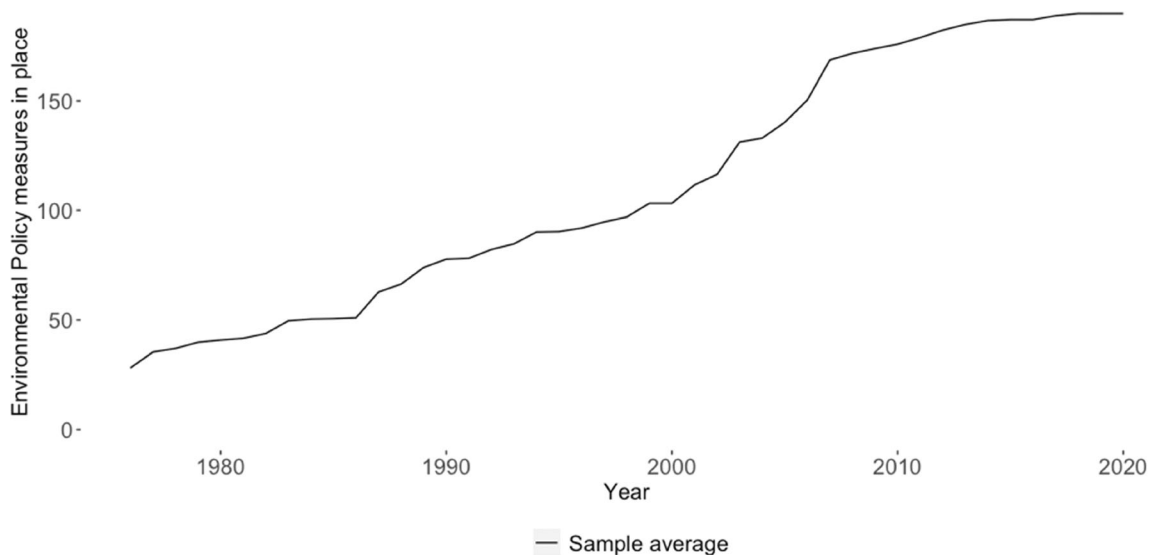
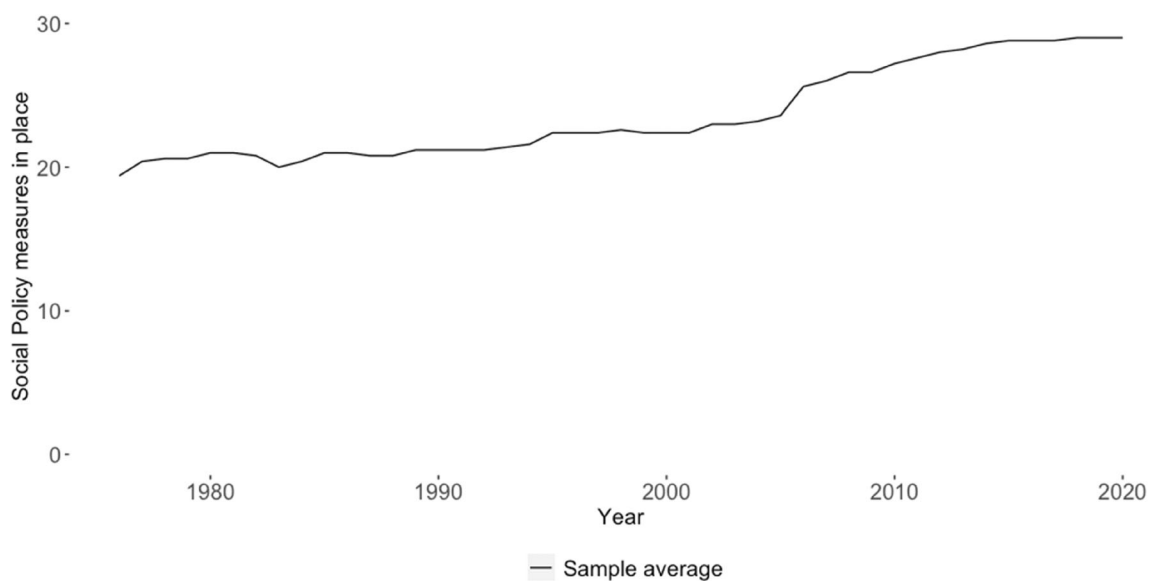**Figure 1** Environmental policy growth in the countries under study.

Figure 2 Social policy growth in the countries under study.

decades (1976–2020) (Adam et al., 2019, 2022). The figures display how the number of environmental and social policies developed on average for the five countries scrutinized in this paper during the observation period. The data presented report policy growth as the result of a continuous addition of new policy elements to existing policy portfolios without the compensatory reduction of already existing policy elements. A policy element is defined by the combination of a policy target and a policy instrument. While policy targets define what or who is being addressed by a new policy, policy instruments define how the target is being addressed. We are not interested in the restrictiveness or generosity of a certain policy since changes in the instrument settings do not affect the size of a policy portfolio. Instead, we are interested in the introduction of new policy instruments and/or the widening of the scope of existing policy instruments to new policy targets. The data collection is based on the coding of relevant national legislation, which allows us to scrutinize changes in the size and properties of environmental and social policy portfolios—the stock of policies a country has at its disposal (Adam et al., 2017). By doing so, we do not only take stock of newly introduced policies but also account for (rare) instances of policy dismantlement.

For both policy areas, we see that there has been a constant increase in policies over time. While policy growth is more pronounced for the environmental field, which constitutes a relatively young and dynamic area, it is remarkable that we also observe substantive increases in the more mature and saturated field of social policy.

Yet, research on policy growth mainly has focused on the adoption of new programs, rules, and laws. The major share of attention has been to *policy outputs*. By contrast, systematic investigations of the *outcomes and impacts* of this output growth have remained rare. The literature acknowledges that policy growth is not a problem *per se*. The production of (new) public policies often means that problems are addressed, public demands are satisfied, and potentially conflictual situations are regulated if not solved (Rasmussen et al., 2019; Wlezien & Soroka, 2016). The production of environmental policies, for instance, helped to substantially reduce air and water pollution (Steinebach, 2019, 2022). However, the literature has also shown that this positive link between policy growth and policy performance is far from straightforward if policy growth is *not* backed by an expansion of administrative capacities for implementation. Limberg et al. (2022) find that new policies lead to improvements of sectoral policy performance only if they are matched by a simultaneous increase in administrative capacities. Likewise, Fernández-i-Marín et al. (2022) show that a widening "gap" between the policies up for implementation and available implementation capacities generally leads to a decrease in the effectiveness of public policies, implying that at some point additional policies make no difference whatsoever or even worse, diminish overall sectoral policy performance.

3. Policy growth and organization policy triage: Patterns across countries and sectors

It is the main goal of this paper to study in closer detail how the structural challenges emerging from a potentially widening gap between growing implementation burdens and available implementation capacities unfolds at the organizational level. Our analytical point of departure hence deviates from classical implementation research, which is typically concerned with analyzing the implementation effectiveness of individual policies. Instead, we concentrate on the implementation performance of organizations to investigate the consequences of policy growth on implementation activities.

In focusing on policy growth, we focus on the extent to which the burdening with new tasks results in a growing mismatch with existing implementation capacities. With this quantitative assessment in changes in the number of tasks, we adopt a rather cautious measure that potentially underestimates overload problems, as more tasks might at the same time increase overall policy complexity and impose conflicting requirements on implementation agencies (Hurka & Haag, 2020).

Yet, a mismatch between burden and capacities need not be merely a result of a growth in policies but may also be the consequence of budget cuts. Indeed, such cuts can be observed in some organizations in our sample, for instance in the case of the Irish National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). In such constellations, however, this development took place in the context of parallel burden expansion, implying that the central complaint voiced in the interviews and described in official reports was still focused on the allocation of additional tasks without adequate resource adjustments. We do not dispute the fact that a mismatch between workload and organizational capacity can also be the result of budget cuts. However, given the fact that we only observed budget cuts for organizations that were also affected by policy growth, we cannot make statements about the isolated effect of budget cuts on the extent of policy triage. Furthermore, we also observed overburdening in organizations that were not affected by budget cuts but experienced policy growth. Consequently, policy growth is—at least for the organizations in our sample—a necessary and sufficient condition for policy triage.

3.1. The concept of policy triage

To compare variation and change in organizational implementation performance, we utilize the concept of policy triage (Knill et al., 2023). Policy triage refers to the prioritization of implementation tasks related to specific policies over others within an organization. As organizational workload increases, there is a growing need to make trade-off decisions of this nature. The prevalence of policy triage directly impacts an organization's implementation performance. When policy triage is more prevalent, the organization's implementation performance tends to decrease, as certain policies and tasks consistently and regularly are neglected in favor of others. Any instance of

policy triage inevitably leads to selective implementation and, consequently, implementation deficits. This remains true regardless of the underlying rationale driving implementation bodies to prioritize certain policies or tasks over others. In other words, when administrative bodies rely on organizational routines that involve policy triage decisions during the execution of their implementation tasks, an increase in implementation deficits is expected to occur consistently.

In the course of their day-to-day operations, organizations frequently face the need to make trade-offs, balancing competing priorities and allocating resources accordingly. However, an increase in policy triage indicates that organizations are making increasingly challenging trade-offs, putting them at a higher risk of encountering implementation deficits and failures. In line with this reasoning, the prevalence of implementation deficits is determined by the degree to which triage influences the organizational routines and internal processes of implementation bodies (Bayerlein et al., 2020; Bayerlein, Knill, & Steinebach, 2021; Bayerlein, Knill, Steinebach, & Zink, 2021). Therefore, we define policy triage as an organizational pattern. Our analytical focus lies in identifying triage patterns that become evident in organizational routines (Becker et al., 2005).

The level of policy triage can be assessed by considering two key aspects: triage frequency and triage severity. Triage frequency measures how often implementation bodies engage in trade-off decisions. A high triage frequency indicates that policy triage is a regular and integral part of an organization's routines. On the other hand, low triage frequency suggests that trade-offs occur periodically or in exceptional circumstances rather than systematically being embedded in organizational routines. Triage severity, on the other hand, focuses on the extent of resource reallocation. High triage severity involves significant trade-offs, resulting in the complete abandonment of certain policies or the neglect of important implementation tasks in favor of others. In such situations, policy triage leads to the effective termination of certain organizational responsibilities. Conversely, triage severity is considered low when the trade-offs are less extensive and rather impede but do not completely prevent the execution of specific implementation tasks. To summarize, a high level of policy triage is characterized by frequent trade-off decisions made by implementation bodies that result in significant redistribution of resources among different policies and implementation tasks. Conversely, a low level of policy triage indicates that decisions regarding resource reallocation are infrequent and involve only minor shifts in resources.

3.2. Measuring policy triage: Case selection and data collection

To analyze organizational policy triage, we compare implementation bodies in the sectors of social and environmental policy. Studying both environmental and social policy allows us to test our argument across (1) different policy types (regulatory vs. redistributive policies); (2) fields with different degrees of maturity (young vs. old field); (3) quite different requirements for implementation (authorization, inspection, and planning vs. public service provision); and, relatedly, (4) differences in political incentives for engaging in capacity expansions in view of voters' affectedness in case of implementation failures (diffuse matters of environmental quality vs. problems in the delivery of individual services).

With regard to the countries under study, we employ a diverse case selection (Gerring, 2008). We focus on five countries (Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and UK) that constitute advanced industrialized democracies, but substantially vary in the institutional characteristics of their political systems and their administrative traditions (Painter, 2016). This allows us to study organizational policy triage and its determinants across a set of (otherwise) very different institutional conditions and, as such, to increase the generalizability of our findings. For reasons of organizational comparability, we limit our empirical focus to implementation bodies operating at the national level; that is, ministerial bodies and independent agencies. The organizations were selected according to their task load by checking the number of policies within a population of organizations in both policy sectors and then selecting the actors responsible for the largest share of policies (see Supporting Information for more details on this process). We exclude local and regional authorities as arrangements of local government are highly difficult to compare across countries in view of strong differences in patterns of delegation and autonomy. The only exception here is presented by the UK where national policies are implemented by organizations in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland as a result of devolution. In this case, we decided to focus exclusively on English agencies in order to avoid skewing our sample. Thus, overall, our sample covers 16 implementation bodies, 8 in each sector (see Table 2).

To identify the presence of organizational routines of policy triage, we conducted a total of 140 expert interviews (see Table A2 in the Supporting Information). Of those, 41 took place with the organizations' staff. The remaining 99 secondary interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders such as regional and local administrations and other actors in the respective policy field in order to obtain additional background information and cross-validate accounts provided by the primary interviews. The interviews took place between February 2021 and May 2023, mostly via telephone or video calls. In the Supporting Information, we provide more detailed information on the interview questionnaire, the coding procedure, and the distribution of interviews across organizations as well as a list of the interviews conducted. To complement our findings and to cross-validate information obtained through the interviews, we also consulted secondary sources such as benchmarking documents commissioned by national governments or international organizations like the OECD, as well as media reports that covered the activities of the agencies under study. The implied objective was not only to verify that information obtained via the interviews is factually correct but also to ensure our coding scheme adequately captured the state of policy triage within the organizations.

3.3. Operationalization of policy triage levels

Based on the above data from primary and secondary sources, we can identify indications of the severity and frequency of policy triage. In doing so our analytical interest is focused on the extent to which triage frequency and triage severity are embodied in organizational routines. To allow for a direct comparison of the two dimensions, we rate both triage frequency and severity as "low," "medium," or "high" (see Table 1).

In determining the severity of triage, we consider the nature of the tasks that routinely were neglected in favor of others. Triage severity can be considered "low" if some policies are neglected (partially) to the advantage of others, but this negligence is restricted to secondary implementation tasks (consultation, research activities) that do not directly undermine the effectiveness of a given policy. "High" triage intensity implies that there are far-reaching trade-offs between policies, resulting in a situation where organizations completely quit and abandon the implementation of certain policies or central implementation tasks, such as on-spot inspection or the monitoring of emissions of dangerous pollutants. "High" triage intensity also means that implementation tasks requiring accurate analysis and control, such as the certification of industrial plants or the granting of social allowances, are merely "rubber-stamped" by the implementation body instead of being examined thoroughly. The definition of core tasks for a given organization is based on its mandate and on the policies that they are supposed to implement which in turn are again based on legislation (i.e., statutory tasks). There are certain tasks that fall within the mandate but are not statutory. Here we would argue that the neglect is not as severe because implementation of statutory tasks trumps non-statutory tasks.

Cases exhibiting high severity indicate implementation deficits in these core areas. Conversely, low severity is assigned to cases where certain measures related to policy implementation, such as additional controls or public outreach, routinely are disregarded, or when certain tasks need to be delegated to other actors on a regular basis.

Table 1 Level of policy triage and its constituent dimensions

Level of policy triage	Policy triage frequency	LOW: Triage decisions rarely occur and only imply the reshuffling of resources between a few policies or implementation tasks under the responsibility of a given authority.
		MEDIUM: Triage decisions occur frequently but are limited to a few policies or implementation tasks under the responsibility of a given authority.
		HIGH: Triage decisions occur often and affect all policies and implementation tasks under the responsibility of a given authority.
	Policy triage intensity	LOW: Triage decisions are restricted to "secondary" implementation tasks that do not undermine the effectiveness of policies.
		MEDIUM: Triage decisions involve key implementation tasks. These implementation tasks are delayed but still performed at some point.
		HIGH: Triage decisions imply that whole policies or central implementation tasks are no longer performed.

Table 2 Dimensions and levels of policy triage

	Low triage	High triage
Frequency	Low	High
Severity	Low	High

The frequency of triage is determined based on statements indicating how often certain tasks typically are neglected in the organization under study. Do organizations display routine behavior that entails regular, occasional, or merely exceptional resort to policy triage? "Low" triage frequency means that triage decisions rarely occur and involve the reshuffling of resources between a few policies or implementation tasks. "High" triage frequency, by contrast, entails that trade-offs in implementation occur often and that almost all policies and implementation tasks under the responsibility of a given authority are subject to triage decisions.

We argue that both dimensions, severity and frequency, are equally important in assessing the impact of policy triage. The severity dimension highlights the significance of neglecting core tasks, while the frequency dimension provides insights into the regularity and persistence of triage practices. By considering both severity and frequency, we provide a comprehensive understanding of the level of triage and its implications for policy implementation. Table 2 shows how combinations of the different levels of severity and frequency determine either high or low policy triage levels. Whereas a low level of policy triage presumes both low frequency and low severity, the opposite is the case for a high level. Yet, in reality we can also conceive of cases that display hybrid combinations of low frequency and high severity or vice versa. Interviewees of the Italian MET, for example, admitted to a high frequency of triage—"it often happens that we miss some schedules" (IT22012824)—while at the same time attesting a low severity: "we take a week for when normally we could do the same thing in two days" (IT22012824).

3.4. Empirical findings

Table 3 provides an overview of our empirical findings. Overall, our results reveal considerable variation in the presence of policy triage. Patterns do not only differ across countries, but also across sectors, and to some extent also across sectoral bodies within the same sector.

While Denmark stands out as a country of low organizational policy triage in both sectors, the other countries under study display a highly mixed pattern, with triage degrees strongly varying across the different organizations. Pronounced variation also exists even across agencies within the same sector in a country, as it is the case, for instance, with Irish implementation agencies in both sectors and with German social policy agencies. Generally, we observed slightly less pronounced triage levels in the social compared to the environmental sector.

Seven out of the 16 bodies under study reveal patterns of low triage. In these cases, available implementation capacities still seem to evolve largely in lockstep with growing implementation burdens emerging from policy growth. In case of Payments Denmark (PD) for example, there are some minor "areas on which (…) [PD] does not have that much attention on" (PD1) at a particular point in time. However, those instances hardly can be described as frequent or severe as they occur only in times of high pressure to implement new legislation on a large scale and do not constitute implementation deficits of any kind. At the most, the agency "runs risk[s] of defocusing (…) [its] managers" (PD2) since the gradually growing legal and administrative complexity in social policy temporarily may entail a few "negative consequences on efficiency" only (PD3). Tasks that are postponed are limited to three kinds of secondary implementation chores; first, adjusting "minor details after the implementation" in case PD's software specialists "find out that the [IT-]system is not coping 100% with the [new] regulation and need to filter out some problems" (PD1); second, optimizing and simplifying the customer services and communications so that "the [online] journey of the pensioners [in terms of their interaction with the automatized client interaction system] is the best experience possible" (PD3); third, improving the overall functioning and procedural integration of different social benefit branches within the IT-system in order to weatherproof against potential increases of administrative complexity in the future (Interview_PD2; PD3). Interviewees of STAR, the other central implementer of social policy in Denmark and the two environmental agencies reported a

Table 3 Organizational policy triage across countries and sectors

Organization	Country	Sector	Triage level	Limits to political blame attribution	Resource mobilization	Overload compensation
Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)	DK	Environment	Low	High	High	High
Nature Agency (NA)	DK	Environment	Low	High	High	High
Payments Denmark	DK	Social	Low	High	High	High
Agency for Labor Market and Recruitment (STAR)	DK	Social	Low	High	High	High
Bundesagentur für Arbeit (BA)	GER	Social	Low	High	High	High
Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)	IRL	Environment	Low	High	High	High
Pensions Authority (PA)	IRL	Social	Low	High	High	High
Department of Social Protection (DSP)	IRL	Social	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium
Ministry of Environmental Transition (MET)	IT	Environment	Medium	High	Low	High
Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP)	IT	Social	Medium	High	Low	High
Social Security Institute (INPS)	IT	Social	Medium	High	Low	High
Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)	UK	Social	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
Deutsche Rentenversicherung (DRV)	GER	Social	High	Low	Low	Low
National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)	IRL	Environment	High	Low	Low	Low
Institute for Environmental Protection and Research (ISPRA)	IT	Environment	High	Low	Low	Medium
Environment Agency (EA)	UK	Environment	High	Low	Low	Low

Note: The gray shading indicates the level of triage: light gray = low triage; gray = medium; dark gray = high triage.

similar setting: STAR's workload and tasks are "fluctuating, but on a steady level" (LMRA1). In case of the Environment Agency, one interviewee even noted that "we are ahead of time with our own schedules" (EA_2).

In similar vein, also the Irish Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Pensions Authority (PA) have reported only very limited instances of triage, mostly caused by a lag between task allocation and resource allocation (Knill et al., 2023). In other words: it takes some time before the agency gets what it needs to implement policies. As one interviewee noted, there is usually a period of two to three years when new resources are not available yet, which can be exhausting and stressful (IR21051001). At the same time, however, all interviewees agreed that any overload is generally well-contained. Both agencies very rarely have to resort to policy triage in order to remain operative beyond the fact that some actors occasionally have to wait longer for environmental permits for example (IR21052702; IR21053104; IR21061006).

Lastly, the German Bundesagentur für Arbeit (Federal Employment Agency; BA) also reports little to no instances of triage. Generally, interviewees even noted an improvement of conditions over the years: "We no longer have these times where we had to follow the 'mass instead of class' principle. […] Fortunately, we have moved away from it" (DE210728). Despite an increasing workload—"additional tasks put a strain on the system"—the organization "usually can cope with this and […] keep it at a reasonable level" (DE210708). Again, minor tasks might be delayed occasionally, such as following up on administrative initiatives; however, they do not touch the core mandate of the FEA (DE210708).

In five organizations, the need to resort to trade-off decisions is more pronounced, with triage occurring more frequently, albeit in most instances without severe consequences on policy performance. The Irish Department

for Social Protection, which caters to the majority of Irish social policies, shows signs of triage when confronted with sudden, punctuated increases of workload. In such situations, certain services are being delayed and clients have to wait longer for decisions (IR21121711). Also, non-statutory tasks such as policy promotion via community outreach for example get cut short (IR21112210). Implementers of the Department for Work and Pension (DWP) in the UK report a similar situation: "Some things are late; I won't pull any punches there. Some things are late by design, and some things are late because it just isn't possible to deliver to various timetables. But we're moving forward and I'm confident we'll deliver everything, just maybe not to every date that's in the book at the moment" (EN23031010).

Being forced to delay certain tasks is also an instance of triage that is observable in the Italian Ministry of Environmental Transitions (MET): "It often happens that we miss some schedules. […] So sometimes we take a week for when normally we could do the same thing in two days" (IT22012824). But also implementation related tasks related to social policy suffer in Italy. Interviewees of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Social Security Institute, INPS, say that they are unable to handle all requests for information by citizens. Instead, they "give priority to the social workers, to the officials, over the individual citizens, because helping an official means they can help multiple citizens" or delay answering such requests by citizens in general (IT21102221). The INPS also focuses on "the most imminent deadlines" (IT22060937). In similar vein, interviewees of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) note that essential tasks basically are fulfilled, although "everything is done a little less thoroughly. […] Certainly, we could do better without a doubt" and the administration is working at its limits: "with no more space; we are reaching saturation" (IT21092719).

Policy triage has already reached very high levels in four of the organizations under study. This implies that they are forced to neglect a significant number of tasks that are part of their core mandate or statutory tasks. It also implies that policy triage became an essential part of an organization's modus operandi. In certain instances, such as the Environment Agency (EA) in England, triage even became an official organizational strategy in order to deal with decreasing resources while implementation tasks increased. A leaked policy briefing stated that efforts spent on low-risk incidents should be reduced. Instead, capacities should be funneled toward ramping up "charge funded regulation" (EA briefing in Salvidge, 2022). According to an EA officer, "unless there were dead fish floating everywhere," no on-site inspection would be conducted (Salvidge, 2022). In other words, the agency prescribed massive trade-offs by favoring income generating measures over non-profitable monitoring and surveillance tasks. This strategy is part of a system internally known as "Incident Triage Project." Its broader goal is to reduce "overall effort spent on the incidents that present the lowest risk to the environment" (EA briefing in Salvidge, 2022) and focus on higher impact events instead.

The Italian Institute for Environmental Protection and Research (ISPRA) on the other hand prioritizes certain tasks—EU policies as well as "emergencies": "We have to cope with limited resources, limited to a set of tasks. We go to concentrate on some situations that are considered more problematic, neglecting other tasks. It is obvious that here lies the risk of neglecting situations that then become problems" (IT21042101; IT21100609; IT21042804). Tasks that officially are part of the agency's mandate but not considered essential: "We only can carry out the routine. [There is no] space for research. Absolute zero. There are no more projects, nothing, just this very heavy core […]. Specific investigations, we don't do it anymore. We limit ourselves to comparisons with the legal limits on the limits set, parameters set. Full stop. Nothing else is done" (IT21100609). Given that research is an essential part in ISPRA's mandate, one of the organization's core functions is undermined—rendering its overall effectiveness compromised. One interviewee estimated that the organization neglects about 40 percent of its tasks (IT21042804).

In similar vein, the German Deutsche Rentenversicherung (DRV) limits its activities strictly on the provision of benefits and systematically neglects other tasks that fall within its mandate, citing "enormous backlog" as central reason (DE210929_1; see also DE210929_2). Generally, "things that are not related to services are put on hold even though they are just as important" (DE210929_1). Inquiries into personal pension accounts for example are a task that do not get attention anymore, even though account holders are legally entitled to that information. As one interviewee put it: "everything else is left undone, postponed. Everything else [being] things that have no benefit background" (DE210929_1).

Lastly, the Irish NPWS also shows signs of severe policy triage: In line with our interview findings, a recent study revealed that the NPWS "cannot meet current obligations, let alone plan for and respond to future

challenges and legislation" (Stout & Cinnéide, 2021, p. i). In particular, the Wildlife Crime Unit is described as non-functional, rendering Ireland unable to prosecute offenses in this area. Regarding specific implementation measures, monitoring, licensing, and the provision of scientific advice tasks are severely neglected (Kearney, 2022; Stout & Cinnéide, 2021). The Licensing, Legislation and Statutory Consultation Directorate "has been subjected to a tsunami of work arising from a large volume of applications for advice, assessment and input from across other public bodies in relation to ecology" (Kearney, 2022, p. 33), accumulating massive backlogs. Similarly, the NPWS severely lags behind in the development and modernization of legislation regarding the Wildlife Acts and the Birds and Habitats Regulations as existing capacities are already absorbed in day to day implementation (Stout & Cinnéide, 2021).

4. Explaining variation in policy triage

The above findings show that the degree of policy triage varies strongly across the organizations under study. Except for the Danish case, there are no clear patterns of variation across countries. Triage also varies rather unsystematically across the policy sectors scrutinized. Based on these results, it hardly seems possible to account for this variation by relying on sector- or country-specific explanations. Consequently, we need to shift our theoretical interest to factors that cut across national and sectoral variables, but also concentrate on organizational differences.

4.1. Triage as consequence of a combination of causal mechanisms

We build on recent advances in the literature suggesting that policy triage cannot be reduced to a single cause but must be explained by focusing on the combination of different factors (Knill et al., 2023) that capture national, sectoral, as well as organizational variables. In unfolding their effects on policy triage, these factors are characterized by an additive relationship, implying that they complement one another in their impact on policy triage. Conversely, however, this also means that the complete lack of one factor cannot be fully substituted by high levels of the other two.

We propose that the relationship between policy growth and policy triage is shaped by three specific factors: blame-shifting opportunities for central policymakers, (2) the implementation authorities' opportunities to mobilize external resources, and (3) the level of commitment exhibited by implementation authorities in overcoming resource constraints. Whereas the first two factors establish an organization's level of vulnerability toward overload, the third factor captures its willingness and ability of compensating, buffering, and reducing overload. We consider these factors to affect policy triage largely independent of each other; that is, an organization's commitment toward overload compensations is not determined by its overload vulnerability and vice versa. Although high blame attribution and scarce resources might negatively affect organizational commitment, this link can hardly be taken for granted. On the contrary, as we will argue below, both classical and more recent studies on organizational behavior reveal that external pressures might even strengthen rather than weaken organizational engagement and commitment.

First, organizations tasked with policy implementation experience varying degrees of vulnerability to overload due to increasing implementation burdens. One key factor that influences this susceptibility is the extent to which policymakers face limitations to assign or transfer blame for implementation failures. When politicians have the ability to easily shift blame, they have less incentive to provide implementers with the necessary resources to handle the growing burden load. The presence of blame-shifting opportunities is primarily shaped by the underlying institutional arrangements that govern implementation processes. These institutional arrangements structure the dynamics and power relations involved in policy implementation. When blame can be shifted easily, there is a reduced accountability for policymakers, which can diminish their motivation to address resource constraints or provide adequate support to implementers. As a result, implementation organizations become more vulnerable to overload, as they are left to manage increasing burdens without sufficient resources (Knill et al., 2020, 2023).

One contributing factor to varying limits on political blame-shifting opportunities is the design of delegation structures (Bache et al., 2015). When implementation is delegated to organizations at different levels of government or independent agencies, central policymakers can lower their accountability costs by shifting responsibility

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for implementation failures to the designated implementing authorities (Hinterleitner, 2020). The level of formal autonomy granted to independent agencies also affects political accountability, with a higher level of autonomy potentially reducing the chances of holding politicians accountable for implementation success or failure (Bach et al., 2017; Moynihan, 2012).

Second, implementing authorities might vary in their opportunities for mobilizing external resources and advocating for their needs within the system (Loftis & Kettler, 2015). In this regard, the political influence and voice of implementing authorities are closely tied to their access to political decisionmaking processes (Cohen & Aviram, 2021). Consultations are an important mechanism for gathering the perspectives and demands of implementing authorities (Lee, 2022). Furthermore, the success of mobilization efforts by implementation bodies is closely linked to fiscal constraints. Resource allocation decisions inherently involve redistribution. In light of competing claims for limited resources, organizations must justify their resource needs. Flink (2017) highlights that organizations with similar structures can experience varying levels of budgetary change due to environmental demands or other organizational issues. This suggests that implementation bodies are more likely to succeed in mobilizing external resources if the policies they are responsible for enjoy a high priority on the government's agenda and thus receive significant political attention.

Third, organizations responsible for policy implementation are not passive recipients of administrative burdens and policies. They have the ability to engage in organizational processes to balance or compensate for overload (Cyert & March, 1963). This may involve utilizing organizational slack, reallocating resources, and improving internal processes (Cyert & March, 1963). Additionally, staff members can voluntarily commit to efforts beyond their mandatory duties, such as working extra hours or taking on extra tasks to support colleagues and the organization as a whole (Masood & Nisar, 2022).

The commitment of administrations to smooth policy implementation and reform can vary significantly (Peled, 2002) and is influenced by the organizational culture and the level of policy ownership within the administration. Organizational culture refers to the values, beliefs, practices, and attitudes that guide employee behavior and shape work performance (Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985). A common organizational culture includes a strong belief in the organization's mission and vision, as well as a sense of unity among employees (Alvesson & Sandkull, 1988). Organizational culture is fostered through joint educational and professional backgrounds (Juncos & Pomorska, 2014). Administrations with a strong common culture are more likely to remain cohesive and exhibit behaviors that go beyond formal requirements, especially in situations of overload (Cross, 2013; Wiley & Berry, 2018). Scholarly contributions as early as Kaufman's (1960) study on forest rangers have shown that this also holds true when confronted with external pressure on the organization. More recently, research on administrative styles has showcased that organizations facing external challenges (e.g., resource cuts) are able to counter these pressures by endogenous entrepreneurship, which is in turn facilitated by the presence of homogenous belief systems (Bayerlein et al., 2020; Bayerlein, Knill, Steinebach, & Zink, 2021).

Policy ownership by contrast affects the willingness of implementation authorities to exceed their regular duties and is influenced by their perception of the policies they are required to implement. When policies align with their organization's goals and values, administrators are more motivated to take additional actions. However, during periods of policy growth and increasing workload, administrators may experience a sense of alienation from public policies, leading to a cognitive disconnection and doubts about the value of policies (Usman et al., 2021; van Engen, 2017). To mitigate this, administrators need to develop a sense of ownership and investment in the policies they implement. Delegating decisionmaking discretion to implementing authorities can improve their sense of ownership and motivation to take additional actions (Brattström & Hellström, 2019; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014).

Apart from organizational culture and policy ownership, an obvious factor that might affect an organization's commitment to overload reduction is its size. Larger organizations should be in a better position to reallocate scarce resources across units to reduce the need to engage in policy triage. Yet, the mere option of resource shifts does not guarantee that such reallocations take place in view of internal organization fragmentation or turf battles between different organizational units. Bigger size does not ensure higher commitment, but rather presumes the presence of a respective organizational culture as well as policy ownership.

The discussion highlights that the growth of policies does not inevitably lead to chronic overburdening and implementation deficits within organizations. Instead, the prevalence of deficits is contingent upon the

combination of three key factors: limits on political blame-shifting, organizational mobilization of external resources, and overload compensation. It is crucial to recognize that policy triage is not solely caused by the sheer proliferation of policies but is also influenced by the specific institutional setup and the type of organization responsible for implementation.

4.2. Explaining triage variation in the organizations under study

In the following, we analyze how the interplay of the above-mentioned factors accounts for variation in policy triage levels across the different implementation bodies under study. Table 2 provides an overview of the different combinations of factors and triage levels. The latter is visualized by either black (high triage), gray (medium triage), or white (low triage) shadings.

4.3. Organizations with low levels of triage

One key similarity shared among implementing organizations dealing with very limited or even no policy triage at all is the low level of overload vulnerability and high compensatory commitment. On the one hand, this can be traced to the fact that the political opportunities for shifting the blame for implementation failures to these organizations are limited: Interviewees in Denmark for example noted that line ministries are highly accountable for implementation results of the agencies they are supervising. Several high-profile resignations of prominent Danish ministers in recent years give testimony to the fact that blame cannot easily be shifted to the implementing agencies as each one happened after they had been condemned personally for the neglect of minor ministerial duties in their area of competence (Interview_EA3; Interview_EPA2).

In a similar vein, it is quite hard for formulators to shift blame in case of the German BA as they supervise the organization directly and have considerable say in how to structure day to day operations (Spohr, 2021). A third of the members of the agency's governing board are representatives of the formulating level. Consequently, if the BA were to be blamed by policymakers for implementation deficits, questions would be raised to what degree they met their supervisory duties in the first place. This however also means that the BA has quite limited autonomy compared to other German social implementers like the DRV. Those limitations of organizational autonomy become apparent when turning to budgeting for example: The federal government has the power to enforce budgetary decisions even against the opposition of the organization's administration (Spohr, 2021).

Lastly, the way how relations are structured between independent agencies and the formulating level in Ireland curtails the latter's ability to deflect blame, making the organizations quite resilient in this regard. Somewhat diametrically opposed to the German BA, the PA and EPA enjoy quite a high level of organizational autonomy which intuitively should make them ideal targets for blame-shifting. Yet, quite the opposite can be observed as relations between independent agencies and formulators are governed via a tight formal framework. Both entities effectively enter into a so-called performance delivery agreement that specifies key deliverables that need to be accomplished by the respective agency within a given timeframe: "with our parent department, we have a performance delivery agreement, where they set out things they want to achieve in a particular year, in addition to our statutory obligations" (IR21052702). In case of the EPA, for example, those include detailed metrics on inspections where the target set at the beginning of the year is benchmarked against actual site visits for example. Performance expectations thus are rather formalized which helps in holding agencies accountable on the one hand but also allows them to deflect unjustified blame on the other.

Furthermore, low triage levels are also contingent on adequate opportunities for resource mobilization: Interviewees of all seven agencies in our sample reported few obstacles when inquiring for additional resources required. In Denmark, for example, there is a "general understanding that policies have costs" (Interview_NA3) and adequate implementation requires resources which need to be provided by central-level policy makers, in particular for national agencies (Interview_NA2; Interview_EA3). Implementers even admitted that they had "the right amount of resources" at their disposal and thus would not "find it fair to complain about resources" (Interview_EPA2; Interview_EC1). Centrally, this follows the acknowledgment that not only policy measures increase in numbers but also tend to get more complex which has been mirrored in additional allocations: "resources have followed complexity [increases] all the time" (Interview_EA3).

Independent agencies in Ireland are usually able to mobilize additional resources as well. Yet, interviewees admitted that acquiring additional staff has been more difficult since the austerity measures following the financial crisis in 2008 were implemented. Nonetheless, they are still presented with significantly more opportunities compared to other implementers in Ireland such as the NPWS for example. The PA's parent department actively relies on the agency to come forward when it requires additional resources: "our parent department would expect us to guide them on resources that we need to meet additional requirements […] because we're the ones to know what it's going to take to do it" (IR21061708). This sentiment was echoed across the organization: "We tend to get a good audience from central government when we're looking for additional resources" (IR21060405). In addition, the organization rakes in quite a large part of its operational budget on its own: "the fees that we charge regulated entities essentially pay for our operation" (IR21060405). Similarly, the EPA also reported that when tasks increase, there usually are also opportunities to apply for additional staffing or increase of the budget (IR21052702).

When it comes to the compensation of overload, the seven organizations displaying low levels of triage also excel in this dimension. All central organizations in Denmark are characterized by a joint esprit de corps among their staffs which is "mostly concerned with implementing policy and making it work" (Interview_EA2) "with a high degree of effectiveness" (Interview_NA3). The central level agencies share an orientation toward the quality, internal consistency, and effectiveness of the policies they have to implement. This organizational style is evidenced best by the rigorous "no mistake culture[s]" (Interview_NA2) and "long education and (…) long working experience" (Interview_NA2)—standards vigorously upheld by its staffers. Furthermore the efforts of organizational restructuring, and administrative resource reallocation show continuous engagement to "change up the ways" they function and adapt to future political developments, digitalization trends, and efforts to drive administrative reforms (Interview_EA1; Interview_NA2; Interview_EPA1; Interview_EC1).

In a similar vein, the BA in Germany also heavily tries to make use of digitalization in order to decrease workload and free up human resources for tasks currently impossible to automate (Schmitz, 2018). Doing so also enables the agency to react faster to requests and inquiries (DE210708; DE210803; DE210826_2). The organizational structure also is rather flexible when it comes to staff deployment: "we naturally provide support from other areas, not just from the respective agency district" (DE210708). The agency is also able to entertain a staff that is highly motivated and—in times of high workloads—does not shy away to push their limits (DE210728; DE210909_1).

The Irish PA's human resource management also allows for great flexibility. Staff members routinely move within the organization on a temporary basis as it helps them to develop an understanding of other tasks the PA is in charge of (IR21060405). Moving staff is described as being a two-way process. As one staffer put it, "I'm going to give one of my resources to a colleague for three or six months in the knowledge that if needs be, I can make that ask, and I'll get a reasonable response" (IR21060405). Doing so creates fallback options for individual units should they be at risk of being overloaded. In addition, the agency acknowledges and actively encourages knowledge transfer between staff members of different professional backgrounds and seniority (IR21061708). The EPA shows similarly high levels of overload compensation. The pillars on which the organization's strategies of forward-looking overload compensation rest are staff training and retention (OECD, 2020), as well as the incorporation of advanced technology in its daily routines (IR21052702).

4.4. Organizations with medium levels of triage

Organizations with triage activity classified as medium show more variation with regard to the combinations of factors theorized earlier compared to either organizations with low or high policy triage levels. We basically can identify two constellations that account for medium triage levels. First, a combination of high limitations on blame-shifting, moderate opportunities for mobilizing external resources, and moderate commitment to overload compensation (which can be mainly observed for the Irish and UK cases), and second, a combination of low limits on blame-shifting, low resource mobilization options, and high compensation commitment (which applies to the Italian cases).

With regard to limits on political blame-shifting, to begin with, the respective implementation bodies score very differently. On one hand, politicians have limited leeway to shift the blame for implementation failures in

case of the Irish Department of Social Protection (DSP) and the DWP in the UK as in both countries those implementing branches are situated directly with the formulators. On the other hand, in the fragmented Italian political-administrative system ample options for blame-shifting exist. The delegation of "responsibilities while retaining control of policy formulation" (Baudner & Bull, 2005, p. 308) makes it rather easy for formulators to avoid being held accountable for poorly designed policies. Instead, "there is this tendency of unloading the workload and the weights on others, downwards" (IT22060937). Yet, in comparisons to other Italian implementation organizations on the regional or local level, national implementers are in a more comfortable position as they are not as often used as scapegoats due to their closeness to the formulation level. Nonetheless, in case of the INPS, one interviewee remarked that "the reputation of INPS deliberately is a bit muddy because it is still comfortable as a scapegoat of other problems" (IT22060937). As a result, the political level can distance itself from the responsibility for the outcome of implementation.

Regarding resources, the consensus among implementers in the Irish and British organizations with medium triage levels seems to be that there are opportunities for additional resource mobilization. However, they are scarce and there are no guarantees that an organization's application for resource expansions will be granted. Furthermore, there is a difference between human resources and (temporary) budget increases. As one DSP interviewee noted, "Our Department of Reform and Finance are doing the funding of the civil service. And they determine how many staff you can have. Look [additional] staff - can't get them, it's just not happening" (IR21112210). The crucial factor seems to be a lack of acknowledgment "at a higher level, I'd say probably at ministerial level - that we do need extra staff" (IR21112210). However, at the same time, the organization reported that recently it became easier to "get [paid] over time, definitely equipment, laptops and all that we would never have had" (IR21127711). In a similar vein, the DWP in the UK also faces similar limitations still, as one interviewee remarked, if "people want to do something, they'll find the resources to do it" (EN23031010).

For the Italian implementation bodies, by contrast, opportunities for resource mobilization are more limited. On the one hand, there is no "automatic translation of this commitment in terms of potentially increasing of staff" (IT22012824). In addition, new policies often explicitly prohibit the allocation of new funding for their implementation (IT21080513). While to a lesser extent than in the UK and Ireland, national-level authorities in Italy can also apply for modest resource expansions—within strict limits and delays (IT22012824). However, at the same time, interviewees from all three Italian implementers report overall stagnating resources (IT22012824; IT21042804; IT21102221). Similar to the DSP in Ireland, they "cannot decide autonomously to increase the number of workers, if there isn't a law that decides that [the] Ministry needs more workers" (IT21102221).

All five implementing organizations with medium triage levels also engage in overload compensation. Two strategies are observable: on the organizational level, resources are re-allocated, processes streamlined, or digitalized in order to free up capacities; on the other hand, on the individual level, staff members work longer hours. While English and Irish organizations compensate overload via both avenues but focus their efforts more on the organizational side, the Italian agencies often compensate overload on the individual level by working additional hours or over the weekend.

In case of the MET and the MLPS, external expertise often substitutes for internal capacities: "Outsourcing is a very important factor throughout the Italian public administration. Many of my tasks are outsourced, especially with regard to the monitoring part of policies, or the management of IT platforms, of technical tools" (IT21092719). However, the organizations also acknowledge, that outsourcing is a double-edged blade. According to one interviewee, it has "worsened the quality of the Italian public administration because it has forced a lot of knowledge and many skills outside the perimeter of the public administration" (IT21092719). Yet, the large part of overload compensation does happen on the individual level: "fortunately, the colleagues, who are ready to make overtime, pull up their sleeves" (IT21092719).

While the Irish DSP also uses outsourcing, it is limited by two factors: First, extensive involvement of private actors in core tasks will eventually see trade unions get involved who in turn will demand more permanent positions within the DSP; secondly, the sensitive nature of personal client data limits information sharing even among public bodies (IR21121711). The DWP on the other hand experienced another negative side-effect of relying too much on external personnel: "basically, we were being ripped off by the people we were contracting with. They had all the IT, they had all the knowledge, and they could run rings around us commercially" (EN23031010). Instead, a recent trend has been insourcing: "it's pretty much consensus that we do use contractors and we will

buy in support. But we want to build that capacity ourselves, build our own muscle up a bit here" (EN23031010). The agency also constantly shifts resources within and between departments to make the most of their internal capacity to "make sure that we efficiently use the resources we've got and we deliver" (EN23031010). Similarly, the DSP engages in organizational reform and restructuring, also on the unit level. Senior managers have the power to restructure their subdivision as and when they see fit. For example, as a result of the uneven distribution of workload due to diverging demographics in different counties, support units were restructured and centralized to deal with an increase in tasks (IR21127711; IR21112210). Compensation on the individual level is limited for both the DSP and the DWP. One interviewee noted that mostly the managerial level would engage in excessive overtime in order not to overburden their staff members. Yet, in times of crisis even high-level management helps out on the ground—"everybody is like all hands-on deck" (IR21121711).

4.5. Organizations with high levels of triage

Most organizations with high levels of triage display a high vulnerability to be blamed for implementation failures. The ISPRA is affected similarly to other organizations on the Italian central level. In the area of environmental policy in particular, responsibilities for implementation are rather unclear. The formulating level thus effectively is able to avoid taking blame for deficient implementation while at the same time increasing workload more or less constantly, as one ISPRA staffer explained: "They often make a mess that we have to solve. Then you are responsible for solving all these overhead problems and they are not responsible" (IT21042804). Interviewees of the German DRV reported similar issues about blame-shifting: "the pension providers have also warned about the complexity […]. But the cries have gone unheard, and the problems have been assigned to us. […] You don't always get the impression that politicians, when they want to follow their own path for whatever reason, listen to the experts" (DE210929_1). Also for the English Environment Agency politicians easily are able to dump responsibility for implementation failure onto the organization using its status as independent agency. The formulating level for example regularly argues that due to the EA's licensing revenue the damage of stagnating—and in case of certain programs—even decreasing resources is not that severe. A textbook example of recent blame-shifting was provided by a former environment secretary commenting on river pollution in certain areas in England: "the former chair of the agency, has attempted to blame 'cuts' to their budget […] The budget for monitoring license conditions has always been fully cost recovered so it was an agency management failure not a lack of budget" (Adie, 2023). Lastly, NPWS does not suffer significantly from blame-shifting in the traditional sense but more from a general neglect and disregard by policymakers as the organization was not perceived as "politically favorable" to formulators and thus they did not "want to engage with [NPWS]" (IR22052428). Consequently, the agency can be described as an organizational foster child by all means: As a result of what MacCarthaigh and colleagues call "slicing and dicing" of departmental portfolios (2023, p. 19), the organization has changed parent department no less than six times since its creation in 1991. Essentially, the NPWS has been used as a doormat that could be burdened with work without providing the necessary resources.

Regarding resource mobilization, again all organizations with high triage level seem to share similar issues. On the one hand, there are little to no opportunities to advocate for more resources. In case of the NPWS, for example, there exists no formal funding obligation as the organization is officially incorporated in its respective parent department. The DRV on the other hand often attempts to advocate for an increase of staffing: "we had too few staff on board. They [the agency's leadership] mentioned this again and again at their meetings [with the formulating level]" (DE210929_2), yet no increases manifested.

In addition, resources also decreased for some organizations. As a result of the economic crisis in 2008, the NPWS' budget was cut by 70 percent. While funding now is at pre-crisis levels again, this was not the result of organizational resource mobilization but rather a force of hand as policymakers increased the budget only after a number of infringement cases were brought against Ireland by the EU. The EA also saw massive budget cuts: the Government more than cut in half the agency's environmental protection budget from £170 million in 2009–2010 to £76 million in 2019–2020, while also providing less and less opportunities for temporary funding of projects.[1]

With regard to overload compensation, organizations with high triage levels also share a commonality: they almost exclusively engage in compensation on the individual level. As ISPRA interviewees note, for example,

overload is dealt with through extreme personal sacrifices on behalf of the staff: "the activities are done, but in absurd conditions, in really harsh conditions and with personal sacrifices. For example, two of my colleagues who have a contract were precarious and part-time, they worked for free while waiting for the new contract because the times are long, [and] you can't stop. […] They worked practically in five years, one year for free without being paid. This is the reality if we talk about a public institution" (IT21042804; see also IT21100609). Similar working conditions were reported in case of the DRV, although in slightly less dramatic terms: "people are frustrated and some push endless overtime and vacation savings, but still struggle" (DE210929_1).

Generally, all implementers with high triage activity display a total absence of overload compensation mechanisms that go beyond the individual level and would constitute some kind of organizational strategy: "it's up to us to make the activities run. It's bottom-up, it is up to us to organize ourselves to complete the work within the deadlines" (IT21100609). In case of the DRV, administrative rules and procedures actively prohibit some of the mechanisms we theorized earlier as being part of compensatory behavior: "You can only work for one team. For procedural reasons, too, you are only approved for that one team. For example, I work on day 10. If there is a crisis in the team of day 9, I cannot jump in, even if I wanted to" (DE211027). In case of the NPWS, overload compensation has also been limited by another aspect: "Communications are poor on many levels: Not enough internal communication or sharing of work plans and priorities and this applies within small units, and at every level, right up to organization-wide. There simply is no culture of communicating and working together. We have no newsletter, no conference, no method whatsoever of communicating across NPWS" (Department of Housing, 2021, p. 5).

5. Conclusion

Our paper shed light on the challenges that arise from the cumulative growth of policy portfolios and its impact on policy implementation. While previous implementation research has primarily focused on individual policies, we advocate for the need to consider the broader patterns of policy change and the resulting organizational policy triage. As we have shown, the continuous growth of sectoral policy portfolios poses a significant challenge for implementation organizations, potentially leading to structural overload and impeding effective implementation.

To account for empirical variation across implementing organizations, we refined the concept of organizational policy triage which captures the trade-offs that overloaded organizations are compelled to make and ultimately impact their implementation performance negatively. This shift in analytical focus toward organizational performance rather than the effectiveness of individual policies provides insights into the structural challenges arising from policy accumulation. Our paper emphasizes the importance of understanding the variation in policy triage across sectoral and national organizations and the underlying factors contributing to this variation.

By examining 16 ministerial bodies and national agencies at the central level in five European countries, we are able to provide evidence of policy triage within the social and environmental sectors. Our findings highlight variations in the degree of policy triage independent of country-specific variables such as administrative tradition, political system, or structural factors such as organizational size. Furthermore, we have shown that the theoretical framework advanced in this study, centrally based on three explanatory factors, blame-shifting opportunities, resource mobilization, and the commitment of implementation authorities is able to account for variation observed in our sample.

In general, our findings indicate that the level of policy triage is not only affected by factors that are exogenous to an organization, such as political blame games or an organization's political leverage to mobilize external resources, but also by endogenous dynamics that determine an organization's commitment to overload reduction. While political factors are difficult to change in the short term, engagement in organizational reforms might constitute a more appropriate approach to handle bureaucratic overload. The link between organizational reforms and the potential of these reforms to reduce bureaucratic overload are hence a promising area for future research in this field. Recent research has shown for instance, that attempts to strengthen the vertical coordination between bureaucracies in charge of policy formulation and those in charge of policy implementation can help to reduce the potential of administrative overburdening (Fernández-i-Marín, Hinterleitner, et al., 2023; Fernández-i-Marín, Knill, et al., 2023). Moreover, our findings show that organizations governed by a "silo mentality" could benefit from more cooperative structures to cope with overload. In cases such as the DRV for instance, reforming

the organizational rules and procedures to allow for a more cooperative approach among units and departments most likely will also mitigate overload to some extent.

While problems of overload and administrative capacity limitations are often discussed as a general feature of public sector organizations, it is important to emphasize that our analysis refers to a specific class of administrative bodies, namely those bodies for which new tasks typically are permanent in nature. Overload hence emerges from the fact that burden constantly piles up, adding to the number of existing tasks the organization must fulfill. The implementation of public policies is a primary example of such permanent tasks. By contrast, overload challenges resulting from a constant piling up of burden are less likely for organizations that deal with one-off tasks, that is, tasks that are off the table once they are fulfilled such as policy development or policy evaluation.

Acknowledgments

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ENDNOTE

1 See https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2022-11-17/debates/29A0035B-708A-4796-8C52-395CA86C7C54/Environment AgencyEnforcementBudget#:~:text=However%2C%20the%20Government%20more%20than,was%20only%20£94%20million.

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Supporting information

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Appendix S1. Supporting Information.