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Climate Change Response and the Reshaping of Urban Governance

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Implementing Next Generation Europe in Genoa and Lisbon

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Turin, Italy, February 17, 2026

Summary

This monograph inquires how local policymakers manage the relation between international climate goals and place-based priorities. This issue is grounded in an established debate around climate and environmental policy, in which the interconnection between international and local agendas emerges with lights and shades. The recent introduction of Next Generation EU (NGEU) offers an opportunity to observe similar dynamics. The research inquires the local implementation of NGEU with a particular focus on how the environmental component of the programme (stemming from the EU Green Deal) has been integrated in local expenditure.

At the core of the research, is the questions of whether and how local actors have used NGEU funds to integrate environmental actions into local investments. These questions are linked to policy integration theory, which studies how different policy sectors interact when facing intersectoral issues. The existence of frequent implementation gaps between integrated policy designs and their realization is the theoretical aspect to which this research contributes more strongly.

Methodologically, the research is positioned within a critical realist paradigm of social inquiry, guiding the translation of ontological and epistemological beliefs into methodological choices and techniques. Using a qualitative case-study methodology, the research analyses the cases of Genoa and Lisbon, focusing on an in-depth reconstruction of local causal patterns.

Empirical findings show that municipalities played a central role in implementing NGEU, and that their actions largely followed pre-existing path-dependent trajectories. In this context, results also show that NGEU gave little stimulus to environmental integration, either substantively or procedurally. Three causal mechanisms explain why: tokenism, the nominal compliance with environmental requirements; budgeting, the centrality of money distribution in reproducing sectoral boundaries; and displacement, the subordination of environmental integration to other priorities. Together, these mechanisms reveal how institutional constraints shape actor's choices, incentivising the reproduction of policy fragmentation.



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Dedication

*To the people I love.
My foundation, my safe haven, the good in my life*

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*“I think it might be the best thing I've written in years.
It could be utter and complete garbage. But when I
can't tell the difference, is usually a good sign”*

- Tom Yates, House of Cards, Chapter 31

Introduction

December 11, 2019. The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, presents the European Green Deal as the new flagship initiative of the EU climate action. Europe is now on a course for zeroing carbon emissions by 2050. Yet, in just a couple weeks, the pandemic crisis will erupt in a new phase of economic recession.

December 17, 2020. The European Council adopts Next Generation EU as the programme for post-pandemic recovery. With it, the EU doubles down its gamble and tries to kill two birds with one stone. Fixing the economy while decarbonising it. By 2025 over 800 billion € will be distributed across the European territory.

March 1st, 2024. As I set foot in Genoa for my first interview, I am reminded of its beauty as well as its chaos. Throughout the numerous times I will visit the city, I will use public transport only once. In the entropic magic of Genoa, where tangly roads are always busy, a pedestrian often walks faster than a bus.

September 16, 2024. My hand never felt heavier as I sign the rental contract for the room in Lisbon where I will spend the following six months. The monthly fee is over 800€ per room in an apartment I share with five other people. Nothing out of the ordinary in contemporary Lisbon. But for a country where the average net salary is below 1300€ (and minimum wage below 900€), I wonder how locals can afford living.

What I just listed is a seemingly random mix of trivial personal happenings and pivotal decisions at the highest political scale. Little did I know that, by the end of my doctoral journey, they would all be part of the same picture. In the monograph that follows, my goal is to paint that picture for you.

Before overviewing the contents, a premise is necessary. A premise about the different facets of this work. This monograph is the presentation of specific research, yet of a peculiar kind. Differently than a standard book, or a journal article, a doctoral thesis also condenses a learning process. One that occupied large part of the last 3 years of my life. Perhaps the most difficult task is balancing the scientific need for clarity and simplicity, with the will to let that learning process transpire. The principle I have been following is to allow the learning process to emerge more clearly in some of the passages. For example, when alternative perspectives I discovered deserve to be included at the cost of the argument length; when describing *how* I reached a point makes the point itself *richer*; when I open windows into my personal considerations, like I am doing now. These elements will accompany the following work and it's in such logic that I chose to include them.

With Chapter 1, I open the monograph by introducing a concrete, pragmatic research problem that can be summed up as follows. With Next Generation Europe the EU chose to distribute an unprecedented amount of money to the Member States. Most of these resources will flow through the layers of governance and land in the hands of local stakeholders. However, the access to these resources is conditional to meeting environmental requisites imposed by the EU. Will local actors embrace this opportunity? How?

Chapter 1 details the research problem starting from its roots. It opens with a discussion about important background elements, such as an overview of how climate change evolved from a scientific concept to a paradigm of global policymaking with its own agenda and policy instruments. But it's with the cross-fertilization of climate change and sustainable development discourses that the role of local actors emerged more strongly. Two elements of sustainable development literature are central to contextualise my research problem. First, climate action is not just a matter of top-down action, as it implies balancing global environmental goals with territorial socio-economic structures. In other words, there is an ample leeway in how different scales interact. Second, scholars of sustainable development question the neutrality of climate policy, as coupling environmental sustainability with socio-economic growth can be incompatible. More often than not, it generates frictions and conflicts between actors across different scales.

It's in this framework that local actors – cities in particular – started to develop their own approach to global environmental issues. The contribution of cities to climate policymaking has generated important innovations. Yet, cities can also use this environmental rhetoric as a political move to attract investments, while

maintaining heavy environmental footprints. The EU is a prime example of similar complex and multi-level dynamics. In fact, the European union has based its cooperation with cities on flexible and voluntary instruments for many years. These initiatives, like municipal networks, often bypassed national governments creating direct EU-local cooperation. The European Green Deal, however, inaugurates a new phase characterized by formal instruments and systematic involvement of all governance levels. Next Generation EU, as the main operational tool of the Green Deal, reflects this approach using new approaches to regulation and conditionality. As we are entering this new phase, I argue it's crucial to study cases of local implementation in detail, as a key node in transforming *money* from the EU into *actions* on the territory. This research moves in this direction with an in-depth study of Next Generation EU implementation in Genoa and Lisbon.

Chapter 2 takes the problem defined in the previous and pins it to policy theory. At the centre of the research is still the empirical problem of Chapter 1: whether and how local actors have coupled investments with environmental policymaking during the implementation of Next Generation EU. In Chapter 2, this “real-world problem” is converted into a “scientific problem”. Theory is approached as the *language* that translates something specific and empirical into something general and abstract. For the “real world” problem I study, the theory on *policy integration* represents the more appropriate theoretical lens.

In policy studies, integration is the concept used to define the processes linking different areas of policymaking that usually act in separation. I open the Chapter presenting the key attributes of policy integration. I then proceed to an overview of the main perspectives adopted in the literature, highlighting its internal heterogeneity. Later, I focus on the *implementation gap* in policy integration literature as a promising area where this research can contribute to the debate. It's noticeable that a large part of the integration literature is set on a *policy design* orientation. However, much less attention is dedicated to understanding why integrated designs seldom go as planned.

Given the strong pragmatic orientation towards the research problem, as well as its explanatory and qualitative approach, the theoretical contribution of this research is not in *testing* or *building* empirically general propositions. Rather, I use existing theory as an interpretive tool. Only after reaching a convincing explanation of the events happening in the cases, it will be possible generate new exploratory insights and hypotheses about the implementation gap. These elements outlined in Chapter 2 are further refined in the next.

Chapter 3 is a long and deep dive into my methodology, from its philosophical foundations to the practical applications. It's the chapter in which the "learning" dimension of the monograph emerges more strongly. The more I delved in the topic, the more I came to understand that methodology is not a neutral selection of the *techniques* and *procedures* best suited to answer a question. Rather, it's about matching beliefs about what science is (*research philosophy*), approaches on how to conduct it (*methodology* proper), and implement techniques in accordance (*methods*). It's a process that implies a degree of arbitrariness in positioning my own research among various paradigms. It requires understanding that everything is contested between opposing views, and the only thing one can do is carving a space at the table of discussion.

The Chapter presents my take on the critical realist paradigm of science. It develops the key ontological and epistemological elements that matter for the formulation of (and answers to) my research questions. Which features exists of the social world; how individuals (agents) and institutions (structures) interact; what are causal mechanisms; what can be known directly and what must be interpreted; how theories about social explanations are developed. The Chapter then presents my approach to case studies as a qualitative methodology. What they are good for, and what not; how comparison is intended in this research; and how these elements are sewn together in a research design. Lastly, I present the materials and methods. The approach to interviews; the secondary materials, and the approach to analysis.

Chapter 4 is the empirical analysis. It's a dense narrative that reconstructs what happened in Genoa and Lisbon during the implementation of Next Generation Europe and provides answers to the research questions. The Chapter's structure follows the research process as it evolved incrementally during the process of data collection and analysis: *where has the money been spent? Why was it spent on that? Is environmental action integrated in there? Can I explain how this all happened?*

Closing the monograph, In Chapter 5 I advance theoretical and practical proposition. The reflections in this paragraph link the empirical evidence to the theoretical knowledge, and stimulate questions and hypotheses for further research.

*“- If Peter Russo were a pro-natural gas candidate,
how valuable would that be to SanCorp?*

- The Watershed Bill is anti-drilling!

*- Peter is pro-employment, not anti-drilling. He
just wants to bring employment to his people, and
SanCorp is building refineries. Do you think they
would be open to considering Philadelphia?”*

- Frank Underwood, House of Cards, Chapter 10

Chapter 1

The research problem

Opening this monograph, in this chapter I will discuss the main research topic framing the research activity: the role played by local actors in the complex, multi-level governance of environmental and climate policymaking.

Central to the discussion of this topic is the context of the European Union. Although the climate issue is indeed global, the EU is one of the key players in international governance. Contrasting opinions can be held about the way in which the Union has been dealing with this problem. Regardless, Europe undoubtedly represents one of the most successful cases worldwide (if not the most successful) in cutting the environmental impact of a rather large group of economically developed nations.

As the chapter will present in detail, today’s problem in the EU climate policy revolves around the implementation of the European Green Deal initiative. Already challenging since its adoption, the unforeseen pandemic has made the Green Deal goals even harder to achieve. Instead of delaying or reconsidering such goals, the EU has doubled down on its bet and anchored the Green Deal to the policies for post-covid economic recovery in an organic programme: Next Generation EU.

The topic, like the stakes at play, is larger than a monograph can contain. My work will concentrate on a narrower aspect of the larger problem, namely the implementation of Next Generation EU at the local scale. The specific focus will be put on inquiring if (and how) this programme has stimulated the integration of environmental action in local policymaking. Following classic literature on policy implementation, the actions undertaken at the end of the pipeline can make or break a policy programme (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Bardach, 1977; Hill & Hupe, 2002). This is why I argue that researching the local implementation of Next Generation EU extends beyond the local scale, and assumes central relevance in understanding EU climate policy, contemporary and for the near future.

The construction of the argument in the following chapter follows a funnel structure, moving from general to specific. First, the opening paragraph is dedicated to an overview of the core issue, climate change. This also includes the main characters of the globalist paradigm of policymaking that has emerged from climate change discourse. Next, in the second paragraph I introduce the concept of sustainable development and its hybridization with climate change. This section outlines the contribution of sustainable development literature in strengthening the centrality of the local scale in environmental discourse and policymaking. Third, I pull the focus on the specificities of the European Union. This section positions the Next Generation EU programme in the context of EU climate policy and presents the elements making the local scale central to the programme's implementation. The chapter concludes with the main problem-driven questions I address in the research.

1.1. Responding climate change

The milestones: a short history of the climate problem

Environmental concern is not a recent trend. One could argue that the concept of environment – and its relationship with us, humans – is older than history. Its origin lost in the mist of time. Certainly, we know our idea of the environment has evolved over time, from worshipping the gods of nature to modern political environmentalism. Whereas our ancestors thought nature as a force, a power over them, we have come to find out that us too, have power over the environment. As humans, we are bound to the environment in which we exist, we are part of the whole. And just like the environment affects us, we can affect it in return, both for the good and for the bad.

Today, an idea is cemented across societies: preserving the environment is a goal in its own right, and direct public action is needed to achieve it. Political science literature has been dealing with this recurring theme for more than five decades. In Anthony Downs's (1972) seminal work, the author observes environmental concern cyclically entering and exiting the public agenda – a trend which he theorizes as the *issue attention cycle*. As shown by the author, environmental concerns had already been put under the attention of public institutions repeated times in the previous years. Not just in the political agenda, but also in public discourse, the relevance of environmental issues has lived cyclically over time, with its peaks in popularity.

Major changes have taken place in the understanding of environmental issues. We can argue that early concern about the environment was inherently local. Early environmentalists, as Thoreau (1899) and Leopold (1949) were moved by the value of *nature* as a place. A space to isolate from modern lifestyle and reconnect with deeper human (and humane) values. But also, a space to be protected from modernity. Woodsmen endangered Thoreau's woods and its pond, while excessive and unregulated hunting endangered the equilibrium of wildlife in Leopold. But it's perhaps Rachel Carson's work (1962) that marks the change of pace, as a true political critique of environmental degradation. Carson's book about pesticide abuse is a powerful social commentary, a direct critique towards the greed of pesticide industry and the gullibility and complacency of public authorities.

Can we, today, imagine 12.000 people dying of smog poisoning during one single winter? Can we imagine dipping a hand in a river, and pull it out black, covered in oil? Can we imagine the same river combust in flames? These events, apocalyptic as they may sound, are not from a dystopian book. They are the Great Smog of London, in 1952, and Cleveland's Cuyahoga River fire, in 1969. We could tell other stories just like these (or worse) covering entire books, and they would all be true¹. These events did not just move consciences, they moved States. In fact, it's not by chance that the British Clean Air Act and the US Clean Water Act were introduced in 1956 and in 1972. It was during this period that the concern in public opinion, moving on the tide of disasters, demanded legal action by the States.

The 1960s marked a turning point in environmental consciousness, especially in Western societies, to which Carson's work gave great intellectual contribution. During this period air pollution, waste dumping, oil spillage, deforestation and

¹ For a list, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_environmental_disasters

many similar cases were starting to be directly experienced by people, together with their abysmal impacts. The experience of these events was bound to the places where they happened. People started to see the effects of ruthless developmentalism starting from their own territory. This cemented a local approach to environmental action. Yet, for a long time, environmental policymaking remained confined within the State boundaries and, as shown in the examples above, was heavily issue specific. Public action has long been based on specific themes (air pollution, water pollution, wildlife preservation, etc.) and linked to specific events happening at the local level.

The attention of the public to specific local issues is still a relevant driver for policy action, especially in the environmental field (Domingos et al., 2018; Dziminska et al., 2021). However, starting again from the 1960s, different voices raised trying to paint a more comprehensive picture. Academics and activists started to theorize connections between the specific local issues and global economic trends. The field of political ecology started elaborating broader theories, heavily based on the Marxist (and post-Marxist) tradition of political economy, concerning the root-causes of environmental problems (see Neumann, 2009; Roberts, 2020). These scholars linked the depletion of natural resources to capitalist exploitation, pointing at the global economic structure (and its élites) as the main culprit. New concepts entered the debate such as the links between political and economic power with the environment. Political ecologists rejected apolitical views of the environment, showing the importance of justice and participation in environmental decision making. The global perspective underlying political ecologists' critique, however, remained confined to academia and political contestation for at least two decades. In policy terms, in fact, it's not until the 1980s that we see a global approach to environmental action involving public institutions.

Gradually, however, the attention to the impact of human development on the environment has produced significant changes in the way decisions are taken about the environment, eventually settling on the current mainstream paradigm of *climate change*. In scientific literature, the concept of climate change is quite old, and can be traced back more than two centuries. Most of *paleoclimatology* traces its origins somewhere around early 1800s with the figure of Jean-Pierre Perraudin.² Based on his observation of alpine landscapes, Perraudin raised the hypothesis that ancient glaciers occupied larger portions of land, thus implying Earth's climate had changed significantly over time. This first definition of climate change was thus

² https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/features/Paleoclimatology/paleoclimatology_intro.php

rather neutral, apolitical, and still distant from the meaning the term has come to signify today, but it arguably opened the door to a new idea: climate isn't static. To reach the current meaning, we must move to more recent times. It's perhaps surprising to discover that already in the first decade of the 1900s natural scientists were debating the effects on climate of coal consumptions and CO₂ emissions (Arrhenius & Borns, 1908). These early scholars named the phenomenon as *greenhouse effect*, a lucky expression which has survived in the public and scientific debate until today. Early conceptualizations of this phenomenon gave rise to a series of hypotheses and speculations among scholars and experts. From one side, some scientists argued that higher temperatures could help improve living conditions and agricultural production (as in an actual *greenhouse*). Others developed a more skeptical view, expressing concern over adverse effects potentially endangering human and planetary equilibria. As time went on, more and more data accumulated supporting the latter views. In just a couple decades, planetary environmental concern escalated to reach the highest political decision arenas. Already in 1965 an advisory report from the White House scientific committee was reaching US President Lyndon Johnson, warning about fossil fuels impacts (President's Science Advisory Committee, 1965). Yet, times proved to be still immature to deliver large scale systemic policy actions. Over the two subsequent decades, overwhelming scientific evidence generated a convergence of the vast majority of natural scientist towards the theory of *global warming*. While across the 1960s and 70s climatologists were still debating the chance of anthropic *global cooling* (Rasool & Schneider, 1971), by the 1980s, enough empirical data had been collected to convince most of the scientific community that the planet was, in fact, heating. The new expression adopted in the debate, *global warming*, reflected this evidence slowly replacing the more "journalistic" *greenhouse* effect with a more "scientific" alternative.

During the same period, other environmental crises, like transboundary air pollution (1979) and ozone depletion (1983) set important precedents for international environmental regulation (Coletti, 2024). By the end of the 1980s the scientific debate over climate implications of fossil fuel consumption had reached a general agreement on the causes of global warming as well as its hazards. Perhaps more importantly, these times set the maturation of governmental commitment at the international level. The first meetings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of 1988, and its first assessment report in 1990, set a turning point in global climate governance. Following the report (IPCC, 1990, p. xxxvi):

“Fluctuation of climate occur on many scales as a result of natural processes; this is often referred to as **climate variability**. The **climate change** which we are addressing in this report is that which may occur over the next century as a result of human activities.” [emphasis in the original]

One element is central to the definition: the distinction between natural “variability” and anthropic “change”. The distinction between *variability* and *change* is crucial because it recognizes societal responsibility of the phenomenon and justifies an intervention at the global scale to contain the risks for the population. Tracing a clear separation between natural and anthropic change, thus, implies the inherently *political* element of the climate problem. This result was the combination of scientific data from climatologists, but also other influential intellectual work. One of the best examples is perhaps *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972). Reaching far beyond the mainstream economic assumptions of its time, the work of Meadows and colleagues marks the shift from the economics of unlimited resources to a new systemic view of the global economy and its subsistence.

With the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (1994), climate intervention proceeded and led to the signature of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, which first introduced legally binding emissions-reduction goals for its signatories, some of the world's most advanced economies. The Protocol, in addition, introduced the first international climate policy tools like *emission trading*, together with specific dispositions for the implementation (the *Joint Implementation* and the *Clean Development Mechanism*). Despite the commitment towards climate action, actual results lagged behind in the following years. Failures to ratify (US), withdrawals (Canada), and defections from the second phase (Russia, Japan, New Zealand, Gulf States, etc.) undermined the Protocol's chances to achieve relevant goals. The lack of effectiveness pushed international organization to increase pressure and calls for actions culminating with the Paris Agreement (2015). If, in Kyoto, the attention was put on the introduction of strict, long-term goals and policy tools, in Paris a different approach has been followed. The agreement focused on establishing targets, like containing average global temperature increases below 1.5°C. At the same time, each signatory Country pledged to provide and update a climate action plan every five years, detailing the actions necessary to achieve the goals. This new governance style is starkly contrasting with the previous in Tokyo. While the previous pushed harder on strict, binding regulations, the latter adopted a softer, flexible approach, conditional to periodic monitoring actions. The main aim of this change of strategy is to include a larger share of countries and prevent defections, thanks to the freedom in the choice of tools and their implementation.

At the same time, the commitment to monitor each country's progress through the action plans it's believed to ensure consistent levels of compliance over time.

Undoubtedly, the process leading to the current climate change framework has had positive effects on the will and ability to act on many issues endangering the natural planetary equilibria. Many of the world's biggest economies (as well as polluters) have embarked in economic and social reforms to contain greenhouse emissions, with positive effects on the environment. The EU case is perhaps the most telling example in this sense, but other countries have experienced relevant decreases in their emission rates (e.g.: US, UK, Canada, Japan, UAE). Other industrializing countries like China and India have on the other hand, continued to grow their share of emissions exponentially. Despite the concerning trend, these countries still score low in per-capita CO₂ value, and recent commitments made by both countries seem to cast hope in the future management of the issue.

In conclusion, the advent of the *climate change* paradigm marked a shifting point in global environmental governance. On one side, climate change has become the main challenge to be addressed at the planetary level, since human survival itself has been put into question in the long run. Addressing the emission of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases has thus become one of the primary objectives of public action at any geographic scale. On the other hand, climate change discourse has also assumed the role of the mainstream framework to conceptualize environmental issues in general. All the different environmental problems (e.g.: waste management, air and water pollution, deforestation, drought, floods, biodegradation, etc.) have been causally linked to the main issue of fossil fuel consumption. Following Bulkeley (2021), "as climate has come to be regarded as a systemic issue we witness the emergence of a new form of climate connected politics, where a mass of related but previously distinct issues such as biodiversity, plastic waste, ocean pollution, obesity, and so on come to be linked to and enacted through a climate lens" (p. 279). From the first decade of the current century, the management of these issues started to be interpreted as operational sub-goals of the main global issue.

Policy instruments for climate change

The global focus and concern over climate change have also sparked a fruitful and important debate over the design and choice of the instruments to address the climate crisis. Existing literature has provided a variety of classifications of policy instruments acting on the environment, following different logics (Table 1.1). Some

of the classifications follow the mainstream approach to policy instruments known in policy studies, based on the degree of involvement by the State, represented by the level of coercion needed to enforce the instrument (Howlett, 2000). With little variation between authors on the specific types of instruments, these classifications apply the mainstream division into regulatory, economic, voluntary, and informational instruments to the specific cases observed in the environmental domain. Examples of regulatory instruments include, for example, the imposition of emission caps or the ban on plastic bags. These are the instruments requiring the highest enforcement effort by the public authorities. Economic tools follow, including examples like energy consumption taxes, incentives for renewables, or emission trading schemes. Voluntary instruments are typically non-binding agreements based on trust and accountability requiring lesser amount of direct public effort, such as non-mandatory recycling, offer of public transport alternatives, or pacts for inter-municipal cooperation. Informational instruments, requiring the least degree of involvement from the State, are those aimed at the dissemination of information and risk awareness, such as eco-labelling or public hearings.

Table 1.1 – Examples of environmental policy instruments typologies from the literature

Logic	Common instrument types	Examples
Degree of State involvement	Regulatory Economic Voluntary Informational	(Lindeneg, 1992; Jordan et al., 2003; Böcher, 2012)
Actor relations	Political-administrative Regulatory Social	(Huppés & Simonis, 2009)
Goals	(Prevention) Mitigation Adaptation (Preservation) (Reparation)	(Lackner et al., 2022; Coletti, 2024)

Source: author's own elaboration

Starting from this mainstream typology, Huppés and Simonis (2009) add further complexity, focusing the causal chains constituting the rationales behind the choice of instruments. Here, the basic level of categorization is actor relations. When public actors influence other public actors, we have political-administrative instruments, as in the case of international protocols or city networks. When public actors influence private actors, we have regulatory instruments including, for example, prohibitions, subsidies and eco-labelling. Lastly, when private actors influence each other, we have the social instrument type like green marketing, and

corporate environmental commitment. Starting from these types, the authors then discuss the choice of instruments based on the target population/object, and the goals to achieve. The third typology found in the literature is based on goals and has become the mainstream classification in climate change studies. Following Coletti (2024) we can divide policy instruments in preventive tools to limit the likelihood of future scenarios; mitigation to reduce the emissions; adaptation to enhance resilience; preservation to establish limits on the use of resources; and reparation, to restore previous environmental conditions after producing detriment. The division in 5 types found in Coletti (2024) is an elaboration over the more common typology found in most climate change literature, which conflates the tools into the sole categories of mitigation and adaptation (Lackner et al., 2022). Following this perspective, it's possible to reduce the spectrum of environmental policies between those addressing the root causes of climate change (i.e.: mitigation) and those addressing the effects (i.e.: adaptation). In this framework, prevention, preservation, and restoration are considered sub-goals, fitting into the two main types depending on the specific issues. For example, extension of tree-covered surface and green areas can be an instrument for mitigation, if the main goal is to absorb CO₂ from the atmosphere, but can also be an instrument for adaptation, if the aim is to shade surrounding buildings from heatwaves during summer.

The classifications of instruments presented in Table 1 concentrate their focus on the *substantive* dimension, with less accent on the *procedural* dimension. Following the established literature on policy instruments, a distinction can be made between the actions targeting the core of a public problem (*substantive instruments*), and those aiming to reform the ways in which decisions about the problem are taken and implemented (*procedural instruments*) (Howlett, 2000; Capano & Howlett, 2020). For example, imagine the case of a government interested in the management of urban sprawl and preservation of green areas. The *substantive* instruments to achieve this goal include regulations (e.g.: making construction requirements more stringent) or financial measures (e.g.: imposing compensations to developers based on the exploited natural resources). Additionally, the same authority could adopt *procedural* instruments. For example, nominating a committee of experts, citizens, and stakeholders tasked with the evaluation of new developmental projects, with the goal of balancing economic opportunity with environmental preservation.

Substantive instruments have received much attention in the research on climate change, at any given geographical scale, from the local level to the global

one. This is also related to the fact that climate change and environmental studies have crossed disciplinary boundaries, and many different scientific fields actively participate to the climate debate. Each discipline can bring its own perspective, so that policymaking in this field has extended as an object of study beyond the traditional boundaries of the social sciences. Many technical “STEM” disciplines such as information technologies, engineering, architecture, spatial planning, physics, biology have entered the debate, together with natural sciences, producing an abundance of studies on the substantive solutions to environmental issues. However rich, the debate has not focused on the *procedural* dimension with the same intensity as the substantive one (Bali et al., 2021). Clearly, the interrelation between procedural and substantive instruments is paramount for curbing climate change effectively. Literature on *policy mixes* has already highlighted the importance of choosing the right combination of tools to generate synergies, combining both substantive and procedural tools together to enhance the effectiveness of policy choices (Capano & Howlett, 2020).

One procedural aspect that has been investigated with substantial scientific interest, especially in relation to local environmental issues, is the topic of public participation and, more generally, increased citizens’ involvement in the decision-making process (Layzer, 2002; Bobbio & Pomatto, 2007; Dryzek & Pickering, 2017; Falanga et al., 2021). Inclusive approaches to policymaking, either *participatory* or *deliberative* (Elstub, 2018) have traditionally been linked to local issues like urban planning and municipal budgeting, especially in response to territorial concerns related to the environmental impacts of infrastructure and developmental projects on local communities. On a broader level, proponents of the introduction of participatory approaches aimed to create an innovative way to face conflictual decision-making in an era characterized by the crisis of the traditional post-war party structure and widespread public dissatisfaction with the ways political decisions are taken (Bobbio & Pomatto, 2007). With regard to climate change literature, participatory and deliberative approaches have been supported by the degrowth (and post-growth) scholarships which will be presented in further detail in the following section (Büchs, 2021; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Parrique, 2022). This literature follows the assumption that environmental goals cannot be achieved without substantial changes in the distribution of economic resources and political power. These theories identify the lack of transparency and participation as one of the main limits to the achievement of environmental wellbeing. From this perspective, the redistribution of decision-making power thus becomes a necessary condition for the redistribution of environmental costs and resources in a sustainable way. Research on participatory approaches to environmental policy

formulation, adoption, and evaluation at the local level has found ample development in the literature. Understandably, this literature has put less accent on the implementation phase. This stage of the policy cycle is typically an exclusive domain of bureaucrats and experts, where citizens mainly play the role of *policy takers*, whose actions cannot influence the structure of the policy.

Another procedural aspect relevant to the debate on climate policymaking is the coordination of the different actors involved. (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010; Adelle & Russel, 2013). As shown above, acting on climate change requires the involvement of a variety of institutions with different mandates at various geographical scale. The *fragmentation* between these actors have been put into question, as one of the limits to the effectiveness of climate actions. While agreeing on the broader discourse on climate change, putting action in practice requires a great deal of coordination. From this perspective, coordination measures represent one of the main procedural instruments to facilitate collective action towards common goals. Yet, combining substantive and procedural instruments to manage fragmentation has proven to be a major challenge, and possibly one of the limits to the effectiveness of global measures to curb climate change. This has also been identified as one of the main elements of *wickedness* in managing climate policies. As theorized by Rittel and Webber (1973), *wicked problems* are a particularly tough to solve due to their nature and characteristics. Since its ideation in the 1970s, this definition of wickedness has obtained great success, and still finds large application. Some decades after, Levin et al. (2012) have linked the concept of wickedness with climate change, revisiting the original “wicked problem” definition using the expression *super wicked problem*. Building on the initial definition of wicked problems, the authors have included a larger number of characters rendering this problem particularly tough to solve. One of the key elements of wickedness is the cross-boundary nature of climate problems, which span across many domains of policymaking and influence virtually all aspects of social life. Coordinating action in such circumstances is therefore a key issue.

The following paragraphs will unpack the cross-boundary nature of the climate problem drawing from the literature on sustainable development, moving the focus from international guidance to local action.

1.2. Sustainable development: strengthening the centrality of the local scale

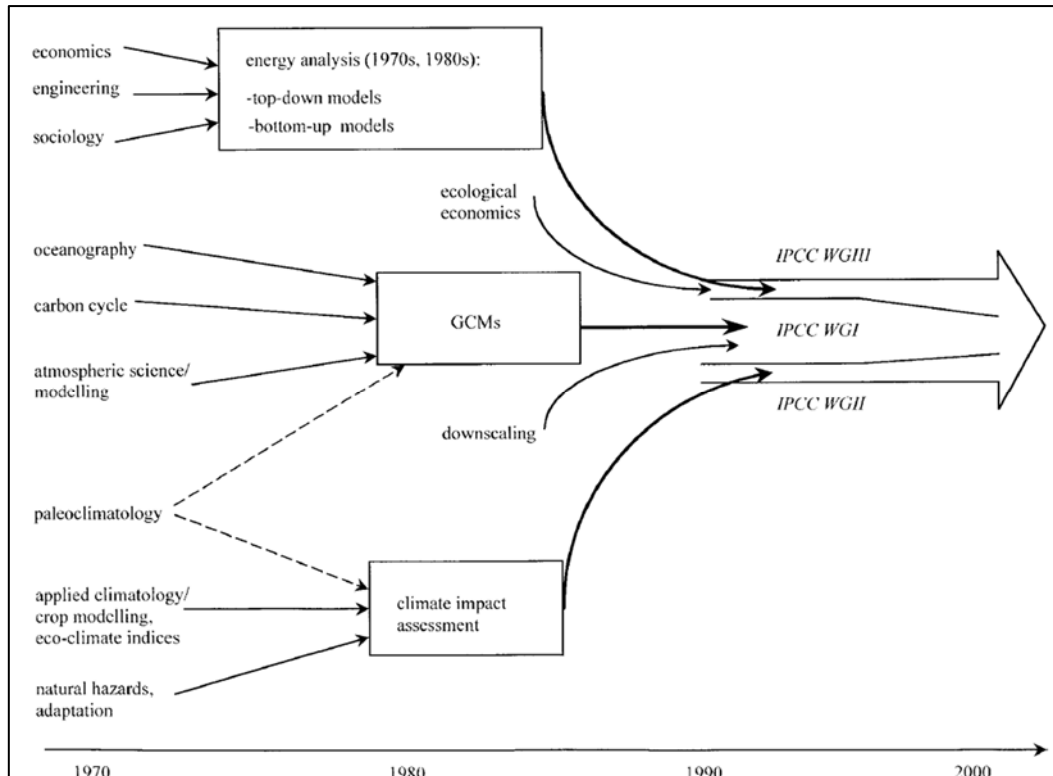
Sustainable development: discourse and approaches

The climate change paradigm has reached its maturation starting from the accumulation of local events, together with growing climatological evidence of global warming, eventually reaching the highest international attention. Yet, this doesn't mean that sub-national levels of government lack a place in environmental action. On the contrary, with the advent of the climate change paradigm the local scale has gained importance despite remaining on the background of the mainstream climate change discourse. The importance of local governance structures in the fight to climate change emerges, in particular, in relation to the topic of *sustainable development* (SD). This concept found a privileged space in environmental discourse starting from the influential Brundtland Report (United Nations General Assembly, 1987). This document marks one of the milestones in the definition of sustainable development, as “the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Ch. 1, Art. 27).

At the core of the concept of sustainable development is the idea of the interdependence of three main attributes, respectively economic, social, and environmental well-being (Matthew & Hammill, 2009). The main distinction between the concepts of climate change and sustainable development is a matter of discourse (S. Cohen et al., 1998). While climate change discourse emerged and developed around technical-oriented disciplines and communities of practice (e.g.: climatology, engineering, etc.), SD did so around social-oriented ones (e.g.: environmentalism, sociology, etc.). Historically, both discourses have engaged in reciprocal criticism (S. Cohen et al., 1998). Climate change discourse was accused of reductionism, technical-instrumental rationality, and liberal-technocratic policy styles. The first refers to the tendency of reducing environmental issues to chemical and physical processes like the oceanic and atmospheric carbon cycles. The second refers to the tendency to approach the problem from a technical perspective, ignoring its social drivers as well as the social implications of the solutions proposed. The third refers to the style of policymaking focused on global emissions, disregarding the peculiarities of local contexts and the importance of community involvement. Conversely, SD arguments were often accused of being vague, rhetoric, and delusional. Vague because there is no clear definition, and different

actors can interpret the concept in contrasting ways. Rhetoric because vague definitions offer the chance to the multiple actors to adopt opportunistic behaviours and moral hazard (e.g.: green washing). Delusional, SD-oriented discourse is often seen as idealistic in its goal of pursuing all three facets of economic, environmental and social prosperity. However, over time the concepts of climate change and SD have become more and more intertwined, eventually being recognized as two “lenses” to approach the same subject (S. Cohen et al., 1998; J. B. Robinson & Herbert, 2001; J. Robinson et al., 2006; Maggs et al., 2025). In other words, while the technical/social divide is still present, it’s often impossible to trace a clear distinction between the two concepts sharing substantial overlaps.

Figure 1.1 – The climate change discourse, 1970s to 2000s



Source: (J. B. Robinson & Herbert, 2001)

While the separation of the concepts is more evident in discourse, their interlinkage is apparent in practice. The adoption of actions and commitments for climate change and sustainable development, in fact, moves in parallel around the same community of practice, and evolves around the same international events and summits (Figure 1). For example, shortly after the first IPCC assessment on climate change, the 1992 Earth Summit institutionalized the concept of SD with the introduction of the Agenda 21. Adopted by 178 countries participating to the

summit, the Agenda 21 is an action plan serving as a blueprint for the integration of social, economic, and environmental goals. Its contents included a detailed unpacking of SD goals into specific actions and targets. Although non-binding, the Agenda 21 represented a stepstone of SD practice, with important influence on subsequent agreements. The 1988 IPCC and the subsequent 1992 Rio conference mark the point of connection between different disciplines and discourses (Figure 1). Thus, the maturation of the climate change paradigm in the international political agenda also coincides with the hybridization of literatures on SD and climate change.

After, with the Paris agreement (2015) the interconnection between climate change and SD has been strengthened even more in both discourse and practice. If, on the climate side, signatory Countries pledged further action, on the SD side the Agreement has revised the Agenda 21 into the UN Agenda 2030. The new Agenda 2030 is composed of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targeting social-economic-environmental priorities, detailed in 169 targets to be achieved. *Climate action* (SDG 13) has been included among the list of goals, de-facto integrating international climate commitments into the concept of SD. This emerges clearly in the 2023 SDG Report (UN, 2023) calling for “strengthening social cohesion in order to secure dignity, opportunity and rights for all while reorienting economies through green and digital transitions and towards resilient trajectories compatible with the goal of the Paris Agreement to limit the global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius” (p. 6).

Despite substantial integration with the climate change discourse, the debate over sustainable development is characterised by internal ontological and epistemological fractures. This debate has given rise to different approaches over SD theory and practice. Reconstructing this debate, Grist (2008) identifies two groups of approaches, the *reformist-mainstream* and *radical* groups. While the former group is characterized by approaches focusing on technological and market-based solutions to achieve sustainability, the latter group is characterized by a more vivid critique of societal and economic power structures. The main reformist-mainstream approach is known as the *green growth* approach, while the radical counterpart is represented by the *degrowth* approach (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021; Kreinin & Aigner, 2022; Green, 2023).

Currently, the international approach to climate and SD policymaking – mainstream in UN discourse and SDG implementation – is oriented towards green growth. This approach stems from macroeconomic assumptions about the

compatibility between traditional GDP growth and environmental sustainability (Mandle et al., 2019). For a long time, this has not been the case. Economic development has, in fact, prospered thanks to the depletion of environmental resources, while producing substantial environmental costs. Thanks to works like the one of Meadows and colleagues (1972), today, the environmental limits to economic growth are largely accepted as a matter of fact. Proponents of the green growth approach believe it's possible to keep economic growth via the "decoupling". Decoupling is the assumption that economic growth and environmental costs can be split to achieve the former without the latter. This view is rooted in Keynesian economy, and evolved over time through various phases (Jacobs, 2013). Current understandings of this paradigm theorize that environmental conservation is not only compatible with GDP growth but is one of the main drivers of growth itself.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, proponents of the degrowth approach refuse the idea of decoupling entirely. They believe the concept of growth is based on the exploitation of resources, and current economic development cannot be compatible with social and environmental prosperity. Following Jackson (2016), current evidence supports the existence of a type of decoupling called "relative" (i.e.: increased efficiency in resource use per GDP unit) but there is a substantial lack of evidence for "absolute" decoupling (i.e.: decrease in the total amount of resources spent per GDP unit). Following this, degrowth economists believe mainstream approaches like green growth are not capable of reaching the Paris Agreement goals, nor respect planetary boundaries for resources regeneration (Green, 2022; Vogel & Hickel, 2023). Since the world has finite resources, perpetual growth is not only seen as unrealistic, but also destructive for the economic and social systems. Following these ideas, the literature on degrowth suggests that the inversion of the trend can only be reached through a radical transformation of citizens' lifestyles, and public policies should prioritize this type of goals (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Parrique, 2022)

So far, the debate between opposing paradigms lacks common ground. On the one hand, approaching the 10th anniversary of the Paris agreement, emissions and environmental impacts have been contained in some areas, but keep worsening globally. This is demonstrated by the UN's general dissatisfaction with SDGs implementation (UN, 2023). Following the UN report, the Agenda 2030 targets have not only been largely missed, but living conditions have worsened in many areas, especially in the Global South where the adverse climate effects have the heaviest consequences. Evidence like this is often used to claim the inadequacy of

mainstream approaches and the necessity to adopt radical ones. Yet, degrowth approaches struggle to present themselves as a realistic alternative to green growth, for both ideological and practical reasons. The claim of utopianism comes from within the movement itself (Parrique, 2022). While this approach has been effective in the identification of many deep-rooted problems of social, economic, and environmental justice (and injustice), its utopistic premises make it harder to enter pragmatic policymaking processes. Consequently, the policy proposals supported by radical approaches remain so far unconvincing. These include work-time reductions, universal basic income, wealth taxes, deliberative forums, caps on resources use, limits to the advertisement of resource-intensive consumables, and more (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). These actions are characterized by important challenges undermining their political feasibility. For example, they may produce sudden and heavy economic costs in the face of slow and uncertain socio-environmental benefits. They also rely heavily on cultural and lifestyle changes which can hardly happen in the short term required to address the onset of climate change.

Linking climate change to the local scale

Regardless of the theoretical approach to SD, we can observe the role played by SD in the translation of environmental goals into place-based policies. From the perspective of SD, environmental policy instruments either for the mitigation or adaptation to climate change cannot be implemented mechanically, in isolation from other aspects of societal life. One of the key issues in implementing sustainable development is the topic of *interdependency*. This means that the concept of SD revolves around the joint achievement of environmental, social, and economic well-being. In essence, SD refuses the idea that these three aspects can be approached separately. On the contrary, any action in one of the three areas will have consequences on the others. For example, decommissioning a coal power plant can substantially improve the environmental quality of an area. At the same time, such action will have consequences on social and economic aspects, both positive and negative. Communities could profit from cleaner air and perhaps gain space to be used for communal activities in the areas of the former plant. At the same time, closing an industrial facility will generate unemployment and economic distress for individuals and families.

The issue of interdependencies is at the heart of the concept of SD and one of the main points allowing us to connect the topic of climate change to the one of local governance. Following Bizikova and colleagues (2007, 2010) policies for

mitigation of and adaptation to climate change are to be considered *place-based* actions, meaning that climate action is interdependent with local contextual dynamics part of economic and social development. The role of the local dimension in climate policymaking needs to be studied in further depth to understand the contribution of local actors to the broader climate governance (Wilbanks, 2003, 2007; Sippel & Jenssen, 2009; Lee & Painter, 2015; Fuhr et al., 2018). While the shift from a local to an international framing of environmental issues has been a necessary condition to achieve systemic commitment from public authorities, the analysis of climate policymaking cannot be restricted to the global-international decision-making arenas but has to be broadened to include other key levels of governance. For example, many of the interventions required to preserve the environment and improve sustainability rely on actions at the local geographical scale. Local governments are, in fact, tasked with the implementation of mitigation and adaptation policies, but also represent the geographical scale at which the cause-effect nature of many environmental phenomena appear more vividly to both policymakers and general public. Moreover, the local level is not the mere operational branch of higher hierarchies. As other geographical scales, local governments follow their own rationales and mechanisms, at the intersection of a variety of actors, interests, goals, and resources. While the interaction between supranational, national, and local actors is still often interpreted as hierarchical, research has shown dynamic interactions both vertically, between administrative levels, and horizontally, between actors at the same scale (Fuhr et al., 2018). The debate on transnational municipal networks (TMN), for example, has shown how different municipalities can form coalitions pursuing common goals, while interacting as peers with supranational organizations with the capacity to bypass Nation State institutions (Toly, 2008; Hakelberg, 2014; Fuhr et al., 2018; Domorenok, 2019). Thus, I believe understanding the local dynamics of environmental policymaking is a necessary piece of the puzzle, to understand why, so far, global environmental action has struggled to meet its expectations.

This thesis focuses on a specific type of *local*, that is the *urban* dimension of local policymaking. This is due to the relevance of cities in regard to the topic of climate change. Urbanization has been one of the key phenomena of human development for millennia (Bairoch, 1988). Yet, during the last centuries, urban development has accelerated, to the point where cities represent the most common form of human social organization, hosting most of the world's population and becoming a driver of modern economy³. Consequently, cities gained importance in

³ <https://ourworldindata.org/urbanization>

global climate policymaking, a dynamic culminated with the explicit inclusion of cities in the United Nations framework for SD and its 2030 Agenda, under the Sustainable Development Goal number 11.

Cities, and more generally urban areas, present both challenges and opportunities with regard to climate change. On the one hand, given their importance in modern economy, urban areas are responsible for a major share of CO₂ emissions. Following data from the UN, despite occupying around 3% of the global surface, cities are responsible for around 70% of global energy consumptions and carbon emissions⁴. Urban areas are densely inhabited and constitute central hubs of contemporary economies where people live, work, and move every day. The process of urbanization is ongoing, and cities are ever more growing in size and population (UN, 2022). As cities grow, more space is subtracted to the surrounding rural areas, resulting in increased urban sprawl and loss of green surface. Uncontrolled urbanization can increase existing impacts of climate change on citizens' health, safety, and quality of life, as shown by phenomena like air quality, sea-level rise, floods, urban heat islands and many others. The process of urbanization can also aggravate existing problems, such as traffic congestion, pollution, and public transports inefficiency. Lastly, cities have large ecological footprints, weighting on rural areas for the production (and import) of primary resources and consumption goods.

On the other hand, cities are increasingly portraying themselves as laboratories for the experimentation of policy tools and governance models towards low-carbon transitions and alternative pathways of socio-economic development (Bulkeley et al., 2012). The concentration of people and risk factors in cities have made climate change more tangible, raising the issue in political agendas. Under the pressure and urgency of climate change, urban actors have been pioneering the search for solutions and effective tools for policymaking. Concepts like *smart cities*, *living labs*, *sharing economy*, *circular economy* and many similar others are now common in political discourse. Despite much rhetorical content, these trends are pushing towards the experimentation and adoption of innovative practices for economic and social development (Cuomo, 2022; Nesti, 2018). As highlighted by Bulkeley (2021). Such wave of experimentation also connects to the rise of the political debate on the distribution of benefits and costs of innovation in relation to social and climate justice.

⁴ <https://unric.org/en/sdg-11/>

The existing research on environmental governance at the local level is quite extensive and has constantly grown since the early 2000s (Marvin & Guy, 1997; Betsill & Bulkeley, 2003; Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020; Castán Broto & Westman, 2020). Overall, the debate has focused on the concept of “new localism”, understood as the tendency for cities to emerge as pivotal arenas for sustainable development, particularly since the beginning of the 21st century (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2003). This highlights the renewed centrality of the urban scale in addressing global environmental challenges, suggesting that municipalities can be active laboratories of innovation in climate and sustainability policy. The emergence of new localism has been shaped by a combination of substantive and procedural drivers that have altered both the content and the governance of urban sustainability initiatives.

On the substantive side, local governments and urban actors have increasingly experimented with incentives to mitigation and adaptation, introduced novel technical “nature based” solutions, and fostered environmentally friendly lifestyles. Examples include the deployment of renewable energy systems, the promotion of energy efficiency in buildings, the reconfiguration of urban mobility infrastructures, and the development of circular economy (Bulkeley et al., 2015). On the procedural side, cities have embraced new governance models that include collaborative arrangements actively involving private partners, community organizations, and civil society (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2003; Dekker, 2018).

Despite these innovations, such dynamics have also been subject to significant critique within the debate (Marvin & Guy, 1997; Allmendinger, 2017). A first line of criticism concerns the very notion of sustainability underpinning these initiatives. Scholars have pointed out that, urban sustainability discourse must be critically assessed, as cities often continue to generate substantial ecological footprints, with large deficits in energy consumption, waste generation, pollutants, and greenhouse gas emissions. From this perspective, the discourse of sustainable urbanism risks becoming a “façade” for the attraction of capital and investments, with little overall effectiveness for the environment. A second line of critique focuses on the definition and boundaries of the “local” concept. From this point of view, urban sustainability cannot be understood in isolation from other scales. Cities are embedded in regional, national, and global governance systems, and these multi-scalar linkages have a role in how cities engage with sustainability.

Nevertheless, local climate and sustainability action has grown steadily over time. Particularly influential have been the development of transnational municipal

networks and the consolidation of multi-level governance arrangements (Bulkeley, 2010). The first stresses horizontal connections between cities, stimulating “laggard” cities to join and imitate the “forerunners” through mechanisms of policy diffusion of “best practices”. The second, multilevel governance, fosters the interaction between different scales of government connecting the local to the supranational. Throughout the new localism literature, the issue of coordination is central, and observed from a wide variety of perspectives (Dekker, 2018). Researchers have been dealing with issues like horizontal coordination (Di Giulio et al., 2018; Kithiia & Dowling, 2010; F. Koch, 2016; Pitt & Bassett, 2013), the cooperation between local government, citizens, and private actors (Klein & Juhola, 2018; Lund, 2018), interaction between actors within multi-level governance actions for sustainability (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005, 2013), and transnational municipal networks (Toly, 2008; Bellinson & Chu, 2018, 2018; Domorenok, 2019; Heikkinen et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the debate on sustainable development had a central role in transforming global the goals on climate change of international organization into local actions intersecting social, economic, and environmental issues. In order to achieve global environmental goals, it is thus unavoidable to take local actors into consideration as they are tasked with implementing climate change and sustainability policy on the ground. In other words, international commitment is inseparable from local (and urban) implementation. It’s thus paramount to keep developing research about the ways in which global climate policymaking is impacting (and being impacted by) actions undertaken at the local level.

In this debate, climate action by the European Union has already been identified as a key opportunity to observe the multi-level dynamics that link supranational climate goals with local climate action. The recent initiatives for the implementation of the European Green Deal have further reinforced the EU role in multi-level climate governance and offer further opportunities to inquire the issue of local climate governance. The next paragraph will present these topics in further detail.

1.3. The European Union's multi-level stimulus to climate action

European climate agenda: road to net zero

Among the international actors involved in climate governance, the European Union has grown in importance over the years. European institutions themselves have been using expressions such “taking the lead on climate change”⁵ and “the EU is a climate leader”⁶ when referring to the role of the EU in the international panorama. Even if environmental issues did not initially fit into the competences devolved to the Union by Member States, this topic slowly grew to become one of the main areas of intervention of European Institutions. The European stance on environmental issues has been directed to the harmonization of the policies of Member States since the first Communication on the environment of 1971. Between the 70s and the 90s the power of the EU over environmental matters was still limited, remaining mainly held in the hands of Nation States (T. Rayner et al., 2023). The role of the EU, however, grew in importance over time, together with its capacity to steer Member States decisions regarding developmental patterns impacting the environment. In 1999, the Treaty of Amsterdam established the duty to include environmental concerns into Member States policies, regardless of the specific sector of intervention. This represents an important milestone, strengthening significantly the political importance of the environmental agenda across thematic fields. Among the first instrument to reflect the increased role of EU institutions over the climate issue is the introduction of the emission trading system (ETS) in 2005 for a body of heavy polluting industries, later enlarged (e.g.: the inclusion of aviation) (Jevnaker & Wettestad, 2017). The Lisbon Treaty of 2009 cemented the legitimacy of European institutions to act on environmental and climate issues, officialising environmental law as a matter of shared competence between EU and Member States. During the same period, the EU has politically positioned itself as a prime actor in international climate arenas. Since Kyoto's Protocol, the EU has been reducing its share of emissions in compliance to stringent internal legislation. During the first Kyoto Protocol commitment period (2008-2012) the EU exceeded the required reduction of 5%, scoring an average emissions reduction of 8%. In the second period, committing to an 18% reduction in the period 2013-2020, EU effort went even further. Member States, in fact, have been reducing

⁵ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/eu-climate-change/> retrieved 29/04/2025

⁶ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/climate-action_en retrieved 29/04/2025

emissions by over 32% between 1990 and 2022. Still, despite the initial success, projections are less attractive for the near future, predicting a decreasing rate of reduction after 2030.⁷

Against these cautious predictions, the EU has been pushing even further to maintain and strengthen its role of climate leadership. With the introduction of the *European Green Deal* (EGD) in January 2020, the EU pledged a CO₂ reduction of 55% by 2030, but most importantly *climate neutrality* by 2050. Shortly after in 2021, the commitment was strengthened legally with the introduction of the European Climate Law, establishing the Green Deal goals as binding. The expressions *climate neutrality*, *carbon neutrality*, or *net zero*, refer to an equal balance between CO₂ emissions and CO₂ removal from the atmosphere. To achieve this goal, Member States will have to put in place a massive reduction of emissions, with some estimates reaching over 90%. These have to be coupled with CO₂ removal via technologies like carbon capture, addressing the remaining 10% (SBTi, 2024). To mitigate the emissions, the EU has also declared the intention to introduce a second ETS market “ETS2”, including building energy consumption and transportation, targeting energy distributors. The EGD phase of EU climate action has been marked by the recent introduction of budgetary tools, of which Next Generation Europe (NGEU) is the flagship, together with other minor funds dedicated to curb the social cost of the transition such as the Just Transition Fund and the Social Climate Fund.

However, many among the general public and the scholarly community are sceptical about the feasibility of a *net zero* EU by 2050 for reasons including both technical feasibility and ethical concerns. To start, Rogelj and colleagues (2021) highlighted definitory problems and overlaps between expressions (e.g.: *carbon neutrality*, *net zero*, and others). For example, does a country engaging in “carbon neutrality” refers to carbon dioxide only (CO₂), or does it plan to include other greenhouse gasses (e.g.: methane)? Similar issues are not just a discussion on semantics. The type and number of greenhouse gasses included in the definition can vastly impact the feasibility of the goal and its timing. Already, different institutions at different levels of government adopt different definitions and protocols. For example, China is focusing on CO₂ only while the EU is targeting all greenhouse emissions. Additionally, it’s not always clear if the quota of emissions to be reduced refers to direct emissions only (i.e.: the ones originating from activities undertaken on EU soil), or includes indirect emissions such as supply chains, for which it’s

⁷ https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/climate-strategies-targets/progress-climate-action_en

harder to identify responsible actors and estimate the effect of policy measures. All these specificities make it harder to make reasonable recommendations and scenarios. So far, national and sub-national institutions lack precise operational and implementation guidelines to reach the net zero strategic goal. Other practical concerns have been raised towards the tools to reach the target. For example, attention has been put on the growing importance of environmentally impacting activities necessary for post-carbon technologies (e.g.: mining elements necessary for electric batteries) and the questionable infrastructural feasibility of large-scale carbon capture and storage plants, together with their effectiveness at a systemic level (Geden et al., 2018; Jones, 2023). Other perspectives stress the geo-political aspects of *net zero* commitments, and add an ethical element to the desirability of a net-zero Europe, fearing repercussion on European citizens' quality of life (Arabadjieva & Bogojević, 2024; Crespy & Munta, 2023). Overall, the disequilibrium between the resources dedicated to NGEU (over 800 billion euro) and the Just Transition and Social Climate funds (17 and 65 billion each) seems to exacerbate these concerns. On top of this, the shift towards cleaner energy sources is one of the elements responsible for the increase in life costs in the European area. This has further been exacerbated by the Russo-Ukrainian conflict since 2022. At the same time, the issue of *energy security* could stimulate the Member States less attentive towards environmental goals, but more concerned with domestic security, to undertake the path of renewables, if only just to reduce the dependency on foreign fossil fuel sources (Battaglini, 2024; Khrushcheva & Maltby, 2016; Mišík, 2022; von Homeyer et al., 2022).

Overall, the implementation of EU climate goals relies on the complex multi-level structure of European governance. At the centre of the EU climate strategy is the Commission, playing the main role of policy entrepreneurship (Bürgin, 2023, p. 2; Domorenok & Graziano, 2023). Internally, the Commission can initiate policy proposals and has historically played the role of the main institutions driving climate reforms in Europe over the last decades. On the policy side, it is also responsible for the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of EU resources expenditure. In addition, externally, the commission plays a key role in networking activities between the EU and other international players. Over the years, the commission has also developed a great influence over the European Investments Bank (EIB), which has become known as Europe's "Climate Bank". Recently, the Bank has been increasingly shifting its priority – previously focused on funding strategic infrastructures – to "green bonds" although concerns remain over the transparency of the EIB instruments. Some voices, in fact, have argued that the complex relationship between the EIB (a formally independent financial operator)

and Member States (the shareholders of the EIB) can expose “climate banking” to risks of green washing, as a tool to reproduce the underlying interests of national governments behind a climate rhetoric (Mertens & Thiemann, 2023).

At the opposite side of the hierarchy, local actors (cities especially) have been growing in importance for EU climate and environmental policymaking (Kern, 2023). EU cities have faced over recent years a dynamic of increasing centrality, much like many other areas of the Global North, in the resurgence of the “new-localism” discussed in the previous paragraphs. In the EU case, this urban resurgence has its own peculiarities, giving European cities additional challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, international EU tools like the Emission Trading System reduce the range of action of cities over the most environmentally impactful economic sectors (e.g.: heavy industry, aviation, etc.), whose emissions are managed on the emissions market. On the other hand, the existence of an overarching EU agenda has boosted the opportunity for cities to initiate climate actions independently from National governments. Kern (2023) identifies three phases of development for EU climate urban action. The first phase has been characterised by the development of early voluntary municipal networks, either “generalist” or issue-specific, among which the climate action has taken a central role. During this phase, “forerunner” cities experimented new models of governance enabling them to address climate and environmental issues. Bypassing central governments, these municipalities became primary interlocutors of EU institutions, opened operations in Brussels, and began lobbying European policy directly (Schultze, 2003). The second phase coincides with the decision by the Commission to launch the Covenant of Mayors Initiative (CoM) – a voluntary tool for urban climate action (Domorenok, 2019) – as a tool to implement the 2008 Climate and Energy package”. Profiting on previous city networks experiences, the Commission strategy has boosted many municipalities to join the “forerunners” and adopting similar climate strategies. This said, despite the vast diffusion of the CoM (especially in Italy and Spain), this phase is still characterized by the voluntary nature of urban climate action, which can lead to important disparities in the territorial diffusion and in the outcomes achieved by individual municipalities. The third phase, currently ongoing, coincides with the “new course” of the EU climate agenda inaugurated by the European Green Deal. Although still in development, this phase is characterized by novel dynamics in municipal involvement. On the one hand, the EU is interested in strengthening the success of voluntary instruments like city network initiatives, in continuity with the past experiences. The main example is the “100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities” mission, aiming to reach net-zero in 100 forerunner cities by 2030, via the “Net Zero Cities” network

initiative. This measure highlights the will to foster climate forerunners and present them as an inspiration (and guidance) to neighbouring cities willing to improve their climate effort. On the other hand, this phase distinguishes from the previous, as the Green Deal has launched new instruments characterized by a more structured and top-down approach to multi-level climate governance. So far, the main instrument of this type is Next Generation Europe, aiming to couple post-pandemic economic recovery with the net-zero goals of the climate agenda across multiple governance levels.

Enter NGEU: coupling pandemic recovery with the Green Deal

Currently, the main driver for the achievement of the Green Deal goals comes from the Next Generation EU initiative (NGEU). NGEU, also informally known as “recovery plan” is the financial instrument introduced in December 2020 by the EU to stimulate recovery from the COVID-19 induced crisis. The timing of the pandemic, peaking in Europe soon after the approval of the Green Deal, further endangered the feasibility of the new climate agenda. Given the exceptional circumstances determined by the pandemic outburst, the EU has opted to mobilize exceptional means, making NGEU one of the most ambitious financial initiatives in Europe to date. However, instead of narrowing the focus on economic growth at all costs, the EU ambitiously decided to condition the financial instruments for recovery to the implementation of the Green Deal. Accounting for a financial budget over 806 billion euros⁸, NGEU sets itself as a landmark plan aiming to couple economic recovery with the Green Deal goals. NGEU thus represents an important step forward in the “new” EU climate governance, wanting to exploit the opportunity for economic rebound to foster the net-zero commitments. Doing so, NGEU has become the main operational tool to support the environmental goals taken with the Green Deal, while inaugurating a series of novelties in European fiscal policymaking (Fabbrini, 2022; Freier et al., 2022; Buti & Fabbrini, 2023). These include an unprecedented use of direct transfers to Member States in the form of grants and loans, which could serve as the trial stage for a larger reform of fiscal and financial governance.

To understand the connection between the Green Deal and NGEU, we should focus the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). Formally a “temporary instrument” the RRF is the EU body holding the lion share of NGEU funds,

⁸ Retrieved in April 2025 from: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/recovery-plan-europe_en

managing almost 90% of the total budget (over 700 billion euros). Managing one of the biggest budgetary allocations in European history, the RRF is the central administrative body for NGEU implementation at the European level. Two instruments are used to connect the RRF with the Green Deal: 1) *regulation* and 2) *conditionality*.

About the *regulation*, in EU Regulation 2021/241 establishing the RRF we find direct references linking economic recovery to the overarching EU climate agenda. Quoting from the text, goals include to “develop and pursue actions that lead to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion” (comma 1) and “creating quality employment and sustainable growth [...] while bearing in mind the Paris Agreement [...], the National Energy and Climate Plans adopted in the framework of the Governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action as established by Regulation (EU) 2018/1999 of the European Parliament [...] as well as the UN Sustainable Development Goals” (comma 4). Additionally, the same regulation states that the European Semester (in which the RRF is embedded) “should help achieve the implementation of the European Green Deal” (comma 5). Lastly, the regulation states that “Currently, no instrument foresees direct financial support” to achieve these goals (comma 17) hence the necessity to launch the RRF. This last point is particularly important and marks the centrality of the RRF for the implementation of the Green Deal. This important window of opportunity for environmental action could represent a unique case, as we are currently observing a shift in the priorities of the European agenda, in response to global political backlash towards climate policymaking (Patterson, 2023), and a renewed focus on rearmament (with the introduction of the ReArm Europe plan). In other words, the priorities of EU policymakers seem to have radically parted from the environment to prioritize defence spending and the military-industrial complex instead (Wolff et al., 2025). It’s safe to assume that, at least for the near future, the funds allocated to the RRF will represent the main voice in the budget for environmental and climate action in the scope of the EU Green Deal. To operationalize the regulatory framework, the main tool adopted in the scope of the Green Deal is the “Do No Significant Harm” (DNSH) principle. Established in Article 17 of EU Regulation 2020/852, the principle states that actual measures implemented in the scope of the RRF should not inflict damage on the environment and prioritize sustainable development. Further defined in other regulatory acts (i.e.: Regulation 2021/2139 and Communication 2021/1054), the DNSH principle faced substantial criticism about its actual implementation, making it either too restrictive if interpreted literally, or too vague if approached more flexibly (De Vincenti, 2022; European Environmental Bureau, 2022; Ostojic et al., 2024).

Together with regulation, *conditionality* represents the second instrument securing the connection between the RRF and EU climate policy. RRF legislation explicitly requires that the economic resources distributed to Member States be invested on “green transition” activities for a minimum share of 37%. This is operationalized in Regulation 2021/241 (comma 23) through “green tracking” (also known as “green tagging”), meaning expenditure associated to specific activities on the ground must be tracked and accounted to reach the overall 37% goal. This system requires an important monitoring effort by the RRF over the expenditure of Member States. To follow this process, NGEU relies on a novel approach to conditionality based on *milestones* and *targets*. The first represent qualitative goals, mostly interpreted as a checklist following the procedural/administrative process of implementation of the actions (e.g.: project approval, tender procedure, start of the activities, etc.). The second represent quantitative goals (e.g.: number of solar panels installed, km of railway infrastructure; built surface, etc.). Introduced by the Commission as a form of performance management, these goals are meant to prevent misuse of the economic resources via conditionality. The distribution of RRF funds, in fact, will follow different tranches (instalments). Targets and milestones are supposed to be met by Member States in order to access the following instalment.

Conditionality is not a new concept *per-se* in EU policymaking, but the specific version of the RRF has marked a new phase in how conditionality is approached (Domorenok & Guardiancich, 2022; Moran, 2023; Ladi et al., 2025). Earlier examples of conditionality include the requirements for joining the Union (*pre-accession* conditionality), or the conditions to obtain financial help in case of distress, adopted by the “Troika” institutions in response to the 2010s European crisis of sovereign debt (*eurozone* conditionality), or the historically established conditions over the access to Cohesion funds put in place since the 1980s (*cohesion* conditionality). In addition to these three types, Ladi and colleagues (2025) identify the new one launched with the RRF as *coordinative* conditionality. This novel approach to conditionality is characterised by larger importance of continuous negotiations between the commission Member States. In contrast to the previous types – characterised by a more top-down hierarchical imposition – coordinative conditionality is characterized by a more ample use of semi-formal and informal channels. While this type of conditionality can offer the benefits of flexibility and *ad-hoc* fine-tuning to Member States’ political and institutional needs, it also raises some criticisms. In particular, it has scepticism has surfaced among scholars and practitioners, who have put into question the actual ability of targets and milestones to assess the quality of the investments from a content perspective, while imposing

significant temporal and administrative burdens, especially for actors excluded from the negotiation process with the Commission but holding key roles in implementation (i.e.: sub-national levels) (Schramm et al., 2022; Zeitlin et al., 2023b).

Landing NGEU: the role of local actors in multi-level implementation

The novelty of NGEU and the RRF comes also from the implementation of the tool, requiring the translation of the RRF budget into specific policy measures on the ground. Marking the political and economic relevance of this instrument, the EU has introduced a system based on the use of grants and loans on unprecedented scale, about €390 billion for grants and €360 billion for loans (Moran, 2023). Roughly half of the resources will thus be distributed through grants. These resources are essentially “gifted” to the Member States, as their allocation does not imply restitution by the recipients. The remaining sum – loans – will be lent to Member States as credit, who will have to pay this debt in 30 years starting from 2028, although with favourable terms compared to the open market.

Overall, the structure of RRF financial allocation relies on six thematic missions: green transition; digital transformation; smart, sustainable and inclusive growth; social and territorial cohesion; health; children and youth policies. Two types of measures are allowed: *reforms* and *investments*. Reforms are undertaken at the central level by the Member States. These are structural legislative changes with long term impact, generally transversal to more than one thematic mission. As such, they are broader in scope but weigh less on the overall budget (e.g.: a reform for administrative simplification). Investments, on the other hand, represent specific actions implemented on the field in the form of *projects*, referring to a specific thematic domain. These are short to medium term activities but are substantially more resource intensive (e.g.: expanding a railway infrastructure). The latter cover the bulk of the budget and present the major implementation challenges of the NGEU programme. Common to both reforms and investments is the deadline of the 31st of August 2026, date by which every NGEU-related activity must be concluded.

This puts great responsibility on the actors responsible for the design and implementation of the reforms and investments funded through the RRF. This responsibility is mainly resting on the shoulders of national and sub-national scale actors. At the base of the resources distribution is, in fact, the negotiation of the

National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) between each Member State and the Commission. This has generated a massive diversity in the amount of funding between countries, partly reflecting the impact of the Covid pandemic (as in the case of Italy) but also reproducing the traditional north-south divide, with the Southern countries receiving the major share of resources. The divide is particularly significant, if we consider it ranges from a share of GDP below 1% for Northern countries like Iceland (0,23%), Denmark (0,44%), Germany (0.74%), to around (or over) 10% in Southern countries like Portugal (8,37%), Italy (9,32%), or Greece (16,32%).⁹ This data suggests that, so far, the main European tool to sponsor the environmental transition is allocated disproportionately, and its implementation relies vastly on Member states performance.

Actors involved in the implementation are thus presented with the responsibility to balance a sudden increase in resources with a very stringent deadline to put forward the implementation of complex actions. The case of investments, which include time and resources intensive operations (e.g.: major infrastructural developments), brings to the surface the problem of sub-national actors. These are the ones who will be required to translate investments into actual projects, thus playing a central role in NGEU implementation.

In the aftermath of the pandemic all over Europe, and especially hard on the countries majorly hit by lockdowns and restrictions, the threat of recession was pressing on European and National institutions. In this context characterized by exceptional urgency, EU regulation of NGEU did not include specific indications on the role of sub-national actors, whose inclusion in the design process was left as non-binding (see Directive 2021/241 art. 18). This led to an overall process of negotiation between the Commission and Member States. This reflected in the design of NRRPs that have largely excluded local actors in the design stage, especially in the Southern European countries which have benefited from the largest allocation of resources (Carrosio et al., 2022; Cotta & Domorenok, 2022; Zeitlin et al., 2023a; Urb@n.it, 2024). This concern has also been noticed by experts from local think tanks close to city networks, marking an abrupt change compared to the previous phases of direct EU-municipal cooperation (Boni et al., 2021; Fernandez & Martinez, 2022).

⁹ April 2025 data from: https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/recovery-and-resilience-scoreboard/index.html

This is especially problematic if we consider the important role local actors will maintain for NGEU implementation, as they will be called to manage an unprecedented share of resources after years of austerity. This is especially relevant in southern European countries (e.g.: Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, etc.) which have obtained grants and loans amounting to a substantial share of their GDP. We can expect that in these countries the share of resources destined to territorial projects will be particularly relevant, and perhaps capable of impacting these territories' developmental trajectories with possible tensions building up between scales (Domorenok & Trein, 2024; M. Koch, 2018). We can thus foresee a central role of local actors in the implementation of NGEU, as the local level retains a key role in the definition of activities at the end of the implementation chain. This happens because, despite being excluded from the design of the NRRPs, local actors retain substantial leeway in designing and presenting projects to be funded, provided they fit the thematic categories identified at the central level (Carrosio et al., 2022). Especially in countries obtaining large sums of resources from the EU, local applications have the potential to shape the overall outcomes of NGEU.

Local actors thus find themselves in the need to strike the balance between two dynamics. On the one hand, they face the opportunity to receive large sums of money dedicated to post pandemic recovery. This offers them the chance to re-launch their territories' economies by means of localized public expenditure, with an unforeseen and unprecedented influx of resources. On the other hand, they are called to strengthen their environmental and climate effort, by matching local development with the Green Deal goals. This takes the form of the RRF climate regulation (e.g.: DNSH) and conditionality (e.g.: green tracking). Understanding how local actors will strike this balance thus plays a central role in assessing the ability of NGEU to couple economic recovery with the environment and gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex multi-level governance of the European Green Deal.

From the contents of this chapter, two problem-driven questions emerge guiding the main research effort in this monograph:

- *Is the implementation of NGEU fostering the integration of environmental action in local policymaking?*
- *Which mechanisms explain the presence (or absence) of such integration dynamics?*

To answer these questions, the following this research inquire the implementation of NGEU investments at the local level in two distinct territorial contexts: Genoa and Lisbon.

“Harmony. It’s not about what’s lasting or permanent, it’s about individual voices coming together for a moment. And that moment lasts the length of a breath”
- Frank Underwood, *House of Cards*, Chapter 8

Chapter 2

Theoretical framework: policy integration

This chapter presents the key theoretical elements relevant to this research. Although a more thorough discussion of the understanding of (and approach to) theory in this work will be provided in Chapter 3, a brief premise is necessary to understand the scope of this chapter in the overall structure of the monograph.

In the previous Chapter, I identified the main research questions stemming from a larger research problem, making this work an example of *problem-oriented* research (Lawrence, 1992). Problem-oriented research – also known as *case-centric* (Beach & Pedersen, 2016, p. 275) or *case-centered* (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) – is characterized by a primary focus on the empirical real-world issues, in which the relevance of the research is intrinsic. The underlying principle is that if an issue is relevant to some aspect of our society, inquiring such issue becomes relevant by default. Problem-oriented research differs from the mainstream *theory-driven* research in which the questions and their relevance stem from theory (and are traditionally expressed in the form of deductive *theory-testing* and inductive *theory-building* research protocols).

While problem-oriented research gains its relevance from *explaining* the “big and important things” happening in our societies (Beach & Pedersen, 2016, p. 12), theory still serves the role of translating a problem from *lay* to *scientific* (Danermark et al., 2019, p. 158). This realist approach to theory recognizes the value of theory

within a problem-oriented approach, as a way to systematically ground a real-world inquiry into more abstract forms of knowledge.

As I've presented above, the key problem orienting this research is whether and how local actors have taken onboard the EU mandate to couple economic recovery and environmental policymaking in implementing Next Generation EU. As these processes affect the contemporary and future environment we live in (as well as the way our tax money is being spent) I argue the topic qualifies as a “big and important thing” worth explaining and understanding. However, to do so *scientifically*, I identify the main theoretical frame of reference in the construct of *policy integration*, as the body of concepts referring to the interdependency between different policy sectors.

The contents of this chapter will link the research problem to the literature on policy integration and will be based on the three contributions theory can give to problem-oriented research found in Danermark and colleagues (2019, pp. 157–161). First, grounding the research problem in theoretical literature implies identifying the key abstract traits that make an empirical problem *general*. The chapter thus helps giving more breadth to the research underscoring its relevance beyond the case at hand. Second, different interpretations of theory serve as *tools* to interpret the empirical observation in a pragmatic way (see the discussion on abductive and retroductive theorizing in Chapter 3). To do this, the chapter presents an open-ended and pluralistic overview of the different angles from which the concept of policy integration has been approached. Third, the chapter identifies the “*implementation gap*” as an openly debated segment of the theory which empirical research can contribute to update and/or revise through the analysis.

In the previous chapter, I have introduced the importance of local actors in international climate governance and put the focus on the local implementation of Next Generation Europe. At the core of the issue lies the necessity for local actors to integrate the opportunity to boost local public expenditure with the environmental imperatives of the EU Green Deal. In scientific terms this represents an issue of *policy integration*.

2.1. At the core: the structural traits

The concept of *policy integration* has gained substantial academic interest in recent years as a tool to understand the growing cases of interdependencies between elements of the policy process and finding ways to successfully deal with them. As

in the case of the environment, contemporary public problems are characterized by increased interconnections between issues, in arenas crowded with a multitude of actors with competing, interconnected interests.

It is not by chance that expressions like “policy integration” or “integrated policy” have made their appearance in the academic debate related to environmental problems. In the seminal paper from Underdal (1980), the author introduces the concept of policy integration in relation to marine policy. Given the variety of interests and activities connected to policymaking in and around the seas – trade, ecosystems, industry, fishing, etc. – the author makes the case for a new style of integrated policymaking. This should be characterized by a more ample and inclusive approach to the policy process across all its phases. The concept of policy integration is particularly fitting to environmental policy in general, because of the way it relates with the topic of interdependencies between society, economy, and environment (Paragraph 1.2). In other words, public policies acting on any side of the “triangle” (environment-economy-society) entail consequences on the others. Because of these inherent structural interdependencies, since Underdal’s early work environmental and climate policy have remained privileged fields for the development of policy integration theory (J. B. Robinson & Herbert, 2001; Briassoulis, 2004; Adelle & Russel, 2013; Biesbroek, 2021).

Table 2.1 – Definitions of policy integration from recent literature

Policy integration definition	Source
The process of embedding crosscutting policy issues across the compartmentalised, fragmented, traditional, or siloed policy subsystems	(Biesbroek, 2021, p. 75)
The cooperation of actors from different policy domains	(Tosun & Lang, 2017, p. 554)
In order to understand such policy interdependencies across policy sectors, scholars have coined the notion of policy integration	(Bolognesi et al., 2021, p. 914)
Policy integration is a political process that entails the coordination of actors and agencies across policy subsystems, the combination of instruments from different policy sectors, as well as arrangements for their consistent implementation and evaluation, as a response to a complex policy problem that not one policy sector, policy instrument, or agency can solve	(Cejudo & Trein, 2023a, p. 9)

Source: author’s own elaboration

Following Knill and colleagues (2020), contemporary academic literature on policy integration generally agrees over a set of tacit assumptions. These imply the existence of a tension between the traditional *fragmentation* of policymaking and the interdependent nature of certain policy problems (often termed *wicked*

problems). At the base of such tension is the argument that the more a policymaking process is divided in discrete, autonomous parts, the more frictions could be generated, leading to suboptimal outcomes. As this tension makes it particularly difficult to tackle such problems, overcoming fragmentation comes as the natural answer, hence the need for policy integration. In other words, there is a structural problem in policymaking when dealing with complex issues. This structural tension is reflected in the most common definitions found in the literature, of which table 2.1 presents a selection.

In these definitions, policy integration is anchored on two key concepts: interdependencies and policy subsystems (or sectors/ domains). While interdependencies have already been discussed, it is worth to spend a few words introducing subsystems.

Following established literature on policy studies, subsystems are “defined by a substantive issue and geographic scope and composed of a set of stakeholders including officials from all levels of government, representatives from multiple interest groups, and scientists/researchers”(Weible, 2005, p. 461), or “actors from a variety of public and private organizations who are actively concerned with a policy problem or issue, such as agriculture, and who regularly seek to influence public policy in that domain” (Sabatier, 1998, p. 99). In essence, subsystems represent conglomerates of actors controlling the decisional arena in which the pathways of policymaking are shaped on a given topic (Goetz & Sidney, 1997). Modern administrative structures typically rely on a diverse array of subsystems, each focused on a specific thematic area. This functional division of tasks can be easily understood observing the organizational chart of public bureaucracies, typically divided into sectoral units, also termed *silos*, *sectors*, or *domains* (e.g.: environment, education; healthcare; defence; budgeting; industry; employment; agriculture; etc.). These thematic areas are the boundaries within which individual actors move to influence the policy process, giving form to subsystems.

Traditionally, public decision-making has relied on the logics typified by Weberian models of administration, and reinforced by later studies on bounded rationality (Simon, 1955). In such view, curbing complex problems is achieved by *fragmenting* them into simpler units manageable by smaller groups of actors. In this view, subsystems largely act in isolation from each other, purposely avoiding reciprocal contamination in day-to-day practice. Indeed, the issue of cooperation between different branches is not a new concept in political science. One could easily spot the similarities between this concept and many influential works.

Collective action problems have been known for decades (Hardin & Cullity, 2020), as well as other influential classics about coordination such as Pressman and Wildavsky's (1973) *joint action* problem, and Lindblom's *muddling-trough* (see Greenwood, 2016).

Policy integration literature distinguishes from this perspective and reverses the argument. Instead of fragmenting complex problems in smaller units, the solution is to make the policymaking process larger by the inclusion of more subsystems at the same time.

2.2. The diversity within integration literature

In the previous, I have presented the core elements characterizing the literature on policy integration. Such idea of a structural incompatibility between complex problems and fragmented sectors forms the conceptual umbrella under which vastly different phenomena and approaches can be grouped. This makes integration literature a “surprisingly fragmented” field of study characterized by a plurality of approaches picking different theoretical angles (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010; Winkel & Sotirov, 2016). This paragraph offers a concise review of this diversity of approaches.

A seminal classification of such “plethora” of viewpoints falling under the concept of policy integration is found in Tosun and Lang (2017). As identified in the paper, policy integration literature is characterized by a variety of cross contaminations between policy studies and other fields, as well as grey literature from practitioners, think tanks, and international organizations. At the heart of their effort, the authors propose a distinction between *government* and *governance* approaches to the concept. Government approaches group those perspectives on integration where hierarchical steering retains an important role. These include more administrative-oriented conceptions of integration where the State (or its branches) remain in the driver's seat. Examples include comprehensive planning and various efforts at post-NPM de-agencification. Conversely, governance approaches have a lesser degree of interest towards hierarchy, but by a greater interest in understanding the cooperation of actors in multilevel settings. While there can be substantial overlap between the two categories, they serve as conceptual “boxes” to put order between very different research strands, and as a starting point to develop a more nuanced idea of the empirical phenomena being inquired.

A central – and still unsolved – issue in policy integration literature emerging from the review of Tosun and Lang (2017) is the variety of terms used to describe this concept. Some authors have proposed specific terminological classification of integration. A first example of this approach is the one by Cejudo and Michel (2017) who have proposed a distinction between the three concepts of *coordination*, *coherence*, and *integration*. In the effort of making order among the different terms – in truth often used as synonyms in the literature – the authors propose their own distinction, based on their reconstruction of the academic debate. Coordination is defined as a process of information sharing and task-allocation between members of organizations involved in the policy process, to solve a problem more efficiently. Operationally, research on coordination focuses on organizations as the object of study. Coherence is defined as a process of policy design where policymakers focus on the overlaps and reciprocal reinforcement between different policies to achieve a common goal. The focus here is on the single policies, to see if they are *coherent* with others in the same domain. Finally, integration is defined as a process of strategic decision making aimed at the solution of particularly complex problems, which cannot be solved by the mere sum of individual policies. The focus of research is put on dedicated institutional bodies in charge of complex problems, and the policy capacity required to solve the overarching problem. Here the authors trace a distinction which is based on the intensity of the decision-making effort towards cooperation, and the number of actors involved. Policy integration proper, in this view, is the one where intensity and number of actors are higher.

Another similar view is proposed by Howlett and Saguin (2018). Here the goal is measuring the *degree* or *strength* of policy integration, depending on policy capacity (Wu et al., 2018). The key assumption is that the higher the capacity, the higher the strength of policy integration, manifested in the form of a better consistency between the policymakers' goals and the instruments they adopt. They identify four typical manifestations of policy integration. The “weakest” form of policy integration is defined as *harmonization*, where low capacity leads to inconsistencies between goals and instruments, meaning that most integration measures will be *façade* interventions, or emulation of other contexts. When only instruments are consistent, the authors speak of *mainstreaming*, typically when integration requirements are layered on top of existing policies with different goals. An example of this practice is the requirement to include environmental, health, or gender actions in policy programmes of various domains. Conversely, when only goals are consistent, there is *coordination*. In this case different institutions agree on the goals to be achieved but maintain an independent view on the solutions to be implemented. The “stronger” and final type of integration is the so-called

institutionalization where both goals and instruments are consistent. This requires processes of institution building and the definition of new rules to deal with complex, transversal problems.

Despite these and other efforts, most of the literature has not adopted a standard terminology when referring to the different forms of policy integration. Different terms like coordination, cooperation, consistency, coherency, and others are widely used interchangeably as synonyms of integration. Also given the great variety of disciplinary perspectives on the topic, reaching an agreement over terminology seems an objective currently out of reach. Still, accepting this terminological diversity other approaches have tried to classify instances of policy integration on different grounds.

An established debate on policy integration is the debate on levels. Typically, this is represented by the vertical/horizontal and the top-down/bottom-up divides. The vertical/horizontal debate relates to the type of dynamics linking different levels of governance during integration. This discussion has accompanied the discussion on policy integration through much of its development. Over time, from a more rigid division between vertical and horizontal integration (Briassoulis, 2004), a more multi-level perspective has consolidated. The general tendency is to consider integration as a practical endeavour often involving the interaction of multiple territorial scales at the same time (Howlett et al., 2017). Still, scholars have called for a more explicit recognition of vertical dynamics, with an overall tendency of the literature to lean on a more horizontal understanding of integration (Knill et al., 2020). Similarly, especially when the verticality of the process is taken into account, authors have noticed the tendency of policy integration literature to rely on top-down approaches (Domorenok & Trein, 2024). Rare exceptions are present bottom-up oriented studies like Lambelet (2023) discussing cases of *unintended integration* sparking without the mandate from higher levels, but similar perspectives remain minoritarian.

Recent literature has growingly focused on the distinction between two types of policy integration, based on the kind of policy instrument it involves in practice. This approach is particularly promising given its pragmatic nature. Following this perspective, if policy integration is about applying a form of change to policymaking (see the previous chapter), then we can distinguish between the ways in which such change is pursued. The distinction roughly follows the classic typology of policy instruments in *substantive* and *procedural*, even though it can sometimes be termed differently, such as “law-based” and “actor-based” (Knill et

al., 2020; Dorado-Rubín et al., 2025; Metz et al., 2020; Bolognesi et al., 2021). Put simply, substantive policy integration relates to the formal outputs of policymaking (e.g.: laws, regulations, guidelines, etc.) which can put in relation multiple thematic domains. Conversely, procedural policy integration relates to the practices of coordination between different actors during the policymaking process (e.g.: coordination protocols, formal assemblies, informal meetings, etc.). This distinction has a particular heuristic value, because it provides a clear distinction of phenomena observable empirically on the field.

Additionally, the debate on policy integration is characterized by substantial cross-contamination between disciplinary fields tangent to the core public policy literature. This is especially true for the debate on climate policy and environmental action, which has developed different perspectives on the issue of integration. The two main ones are the EPI/CPI literature and the more recent eco-social policy debate. The first refers to the body of studies dealing with *climate policy integration* (CPI) and *environmental policy integration* (EPI) (Adelle & Russel, 2013; Rietig & Dupont, 2023). This strand of literature is at the intersection of integration, environmental and European studies. The result is an extensive production of literature focusing on a European perspective on “climate mainstreaming” (see F. Koch, 2016; Di Giulio et al., 2018), meaning the diffusion of environmental policy into EU and Member States’ legislative frameworks (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010; Kettner & Kletzan-Slamanig, 2020; Rietig & Dupont, 2021). The second refers to the research agenda on *eco-social* policies. This is one of the most recent takes on the issues of integration and stems from the intersection of environmental studies and welfare policy, which recent contributions have tried to enrich through a stronger theoretical connection with the core literature on policy integration (Domorenok & Trein, 2024; Emilsson et al., 2025; Brandl, 2025). Proponents of this approach share a strong normative orientation towards the expansion of the welfare state in an environmentally sustainable way (Hirvilammi et al., 2023; Mandelli et al., 2023). To do so, the eco-social perspective holds that it’s possible to strengthen positive interdependencies between environmental and social policies, with the goal of a broader long-term reform of the economic growth paradigm (M. Koch & Mont, 2017; Mandelli, 2022). From this perspective, the eco-social literature is often associated with *degrowth* and *just transition* literatures, from which it draws its main normative stance about sustainable development (Cotta, 2024). For this reason, this literature has gained traction from the study of the European Green Deal, especially in relation to the Social Climate Fund and the Just Transition Fund. This literature, also due to its normative assumptions, has been characterized by a research approach mixing theoretical development with activism, in the pursuit of

bottom-up social reform. Third, one hybrid approach to policy integration that is amply discussed in the literature stems from the literature on public administration and NPM (Christensen & Lægreid, 2007; Clark, 2002; Mawson & Hall, 2000; Peters, 2015). This literature is focused in particular on overcoming the fragmentation that New Public Management (NPM) reforms have contributed to strengthen (Hood, 1991). In short, NPM's focus on effectiveness and efficiency of public service delivery led to the introduction of public managerial practices inspired to those of private sector, and the creation of multiple governmental task-specific agencies and offices, resulting in *agencification* (Trondal, 2014). This literature is strongly practitioner-oriented and is thus not surprising that its origins and diffusion are larger in the Countries which promoted NPM reforms more strongly (i.e.: Anglo-Saxon and Northern European countries). Indeed, the phenomenon of agencification accentuated fragmentation in policymaking, generating many issues of coordination between the various competing branches of administration. Central to this literature are concepts such as “*holistic*”, “*joined-up*”, or “*whole-of*” government (Mawson & Hall, 2000; Clark, 2002; Christensen & Lægreid, 2007; Peters, 2015), portraying a practice-oriented approach to policy integration in public administrations.

Concluding this paragraph, a central stream of literature useful to orient ourselves in such variety of perspectives is the “processual” view on policy integration (Candel & Biesbroek, 2016; Winkel & Sotirov, 2016; Knill et al., 2020; Cejudo & Trein, 2023a). Authors referring to this literature have embraced a holistic understanding of the integration concept, linking it to the wider debates on the policy process. In other words, scholars hold that policy integration represents a specific type of policy process, thus extending the meaning of the concept. The plurality of approaches and conceptualizations, thus, can be seen as a reflection of such complex and lengthy processes, that can take numerous forms and shapes. Processual perspectives uncover many of the least explored spots of integration theory, such as policy implementation, which will be discussed in the next paragraph.

2.3. The implementation gap

Over time, the policy integration debate has gained substantial traction across different disciplines and communities of practice. It's easy to understand the reason at the base of such diffusion: policy integration offers an innovative solution to problems that seem otherwise untreatable. It is thus natural that this concept has attracted the attention of scholars, practitioners, and activists, all hunting for

effective ways to stimulate change. However, despite the richness of the debate, a central question remains unanswered: if the demand for integration is so evident and its rationale so logical, why is it so difficult to attain in practice?

This critical issue highlights the existence of an *implementation gap* in policy integration literature. More often than not, studies have highlighted a scarcity of success when integrated policy designs “hit the ground” (J. Rayner & Howlett, 2009; Winkel & Sotirov, 2016; Domorenok et al., 2021; Bolognesi et al., 2021; Sarti, 2023; Dorado-Rubín et al., 2025). Yet, scanning existing studies it’s possible to notice a paucity of analyses focusing on implementation dynamics. As addressed by Cejudo and Trein (2023a), the bulk of the literature dominated by approaches adopting a *policy design* perspective. Indeed, the issue of how to *formulate* integrated policies is crucial. Yet, other phases of the policy process like policy implementation are left behind. What’s missing is a larger discussion about how integrated designs are then translated into practice (Lambelet, 2023; Sarti, 2023).

In the bulk of mainstream policy integration literature, views on the implementation gap are dominated by a narrow focus on *capacities* (Jordan & Schout, 2006; J. Rayner & Howlett, 2009; Howlett et al., 2017; Domorenok et al., 2021; Bazzan et al., 2023; Cejudo & Trein, 2023a; Dorado-Rubín et al., 2025). Here, a first complication is represented by the approach to the concept of capacity adopted, as the literature is characterized by a diversity of perspectives such as *policy, administrative, governance capacities* and more (Domorenok et al., 2021). Common to all these approaches, the debate on capacities in policymaking is strongly actor-centred. This means that individual behaviour in decision-making retains a strong centrality in explaining how integration phenomena do (or do not) come to be. A classic example comes from the literature on “policy mixes” for integrated policy designs (Jordan & Schout, 2006; J. Rayner & Howlett, 2009; Howlett et al., 2017; Bazzan et al., 2023; Dorado-Rubín et al., 2025). This literature stresses the importance of striking the right mix of policy instruments during policy formulation, based on the goals that are supposed to be met. In order to do this, policy capacities are central because they represent the set of “skills and resources” that decision-makers can mobilize for the formulation and implementation of integrated policy designs (Wu et al., 2017). Arguing that this actor-centred perspective has been leaving outside the scope other relevant element of a more structural nature, some research has tried to complement the literature on capacity with elements drawn from institutionalist perspectives. Indeed, recent literature has identified the importance of institutional factors when dealing with processes of integration (Biesbroek & Candel, 2020; Trein et al., 2021; Cejudo & Trein, 2023b;

von Lüpke et al., 2023; Kefeli et al., 2023). Such contributions have placed particular attention on the political side of policy integration processes, calling for a better recognition of the role played by political dynamics in the processes of policy integration. Namely, factors such as the strength of political parties, policy entrepreneurship, the politicization of bureaucracies, and the specificities of contexts all play a role for policy integration. Other studies underline the importance of institutional legacies (Sager, 2006; Koop & Lodge, 2014; Christensen et al., 2016). Bridging these structural elements to the debate on policy capacity, some authors have tried to draw from institutionalist scholarship to inform the literature on capacities, advancing more comprehensive conceptual frameworks (Domorenok et al., 2021; Cejudo & Trein, 2023a).

It is undeniable that the capacities intended as the “skills and resources” (see Wu et al., 2017) of which decision makers dispose are central to implement policy integration processes, as they are in reaching any type of policy objective. Still, despite the attempts to bridge such actor-centred concept with more structural elements, these approaches retain substantial drawbacks. First, conceptualizations of policy capacity become increasingly vague, the more the focus moves away from the individual. This makes policy capacities more effective and easily identifiable at the *individual* and *organizational* level, but much less so at the *systemic*. It’s immediately clear that digital competences and political acumen of bureaucrats (individual), or the availability of quality equipment, servers, and appliances in an office (organizational) constitute “skills and resources” that decision makers can mobilize. However, attempts to extend these beyond to *systemic* involve some conceptual and empirical challenges. Examples of systemic capacities include rather abstract elements such as trust in government, political accountability, diffusion of evaluation culture, as well as values, beliefs and administrative cultures. Here the risk of conceptual stretching is apparent, as any relevant factor of policymaking could be classified as a kind of “policy capacity”. This is reflected in the paucity of empirical studies on policy capacities moving further from the individual or organizational level (Domorenok et al., 2021).

Additionally, the focus on policy capacity implies that the failure of policy integration initiatives is often attributed to a lack of such capacity by policymakers and administrators. This narrow view often reduces the implementation gap to an issue of “rationalizing” policy formulation through a different mix of instruments, top-down capacity building interventions, and improving efficiency. Similar implications, however, have been challenged by empirical research focusing specifically on implementing policy integration. These studies have shown that

even in policy fields characterized by established capacities, as well as a high degree of actors' involvement, integration is often not achieved the way it's expected (Winkel & Sotirov, 2016; Allmendinger, 2017; Metz et al., 2020; Bolognesi et al., 2021; Sarti, 2023; Cavaco et al., 2023; Bannink et al., 2024).

Although coming from various backgrounds, these studies are accumulated by a (more or less explicit) critique of the *rationalistic* underpinnings of mainstream policy integration theory. The main line of critique focuses on the erroneous conception of policy integration as an impartial (or super-partes) process, without critically addressing the underpinnings of this argument. As already identified by Knill and colleagues (2020), in fact, policy integration literature is mostly acritical towards important normative assumptions such as 1) policy integration is necessary given the nature of a specific problem; and 2) more policy integration always equals better outcomes. Specific studies address these points directly. For example, Bannink and colleagues (2024) have argued that wicked problems do not necessitate integration simply because of their cross-sectoral nature; rather, they are “wicked” precisely because consensus is lacking over their very definition, prioritization, and appropriate courses of action. “Wicked problems” are thus a reification of deeper conflicts between “wicked groups of actors”. Bolognesi and colleagues (2021) have shown that increased effort towards integration does not always equal better outcomes. In particular, they show that integration can produce positive effects on policymaking up to a point. But beyond a certain threshold, increased demand for cooperation causes decisional stalling, much like the *joint action* problems found in classic implementation literature (see Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Winkel and Sotirov (2016) discuss how integrated designs, even when embraced by the actors, can lead to strengthening existing fragmentation in practice. A phenomenon the authors call the *(dis)integration paradox*. This can happen because the ownership of the integration process is itself contested between the sectors involved. Questions like “*who* is integrating and *why*?” become central. The rhetoric of integrated designs as “scientific”, “impartial”, or “technical” can often hide more ruthless political games. Sarti (2023) highlights the vertical component of the implementation gap, discussing cases where the transposition of National integrated policy to the local level is negotiated by local actors based on their contextual priorities. Other studies from planning theory, like Allmendinger (2017) or Cavaco and colleagues (2023), frame policy integration within the “soft-planning” tools of technocratic governance, warning against the risk of depoliticization and democratic backsliding involving local planning and local development.

Although sparse and minoritarian, these perspectives contribute to the debate introducing important elements that differ from mainstream positions. An interesting consideration descending from similar approaches is that sectoral divisions should not be treated as merely functional features of policymaking, but rather the representation of entrenched and institutionalized sectoral interests. At the same time, policy integration efforts are seldom about the rationalization of uncontested processes. At the contrary, they rather target contested issues whose ownership is conflictual between powerful actors with competing interests, as in the case of climate and environmental issues. Consequently, integration entails contrasts over the distribution of power and resources *within* and *between* policy subsystems. These perspectives move the spotlight from agency factors (e.g.: capacities) to structural dynamics (i.e.: institutions) more strongly. They do so by showing that institutions can constrain policy integration even when actors have the capacity and the intention to promote it. They thus raise a need for broader accounts of integration processes addressing the implementation gap.

To help us tackle this gap we can draw a series of insights from established literature on policy implementation. This allows to put forward a tentative list of known elements scattered in the literature and useful for the conduction of this research.

Policy implementation research is a vast and ever-growing literature. Summarizing its contents is beyond the scope of this work and has already been done in other seminal publications (Hill & Hupe, 2022). I will limit my effort to an overview of some prominent elements bridging established policy implementation literature to the implementation gap in policy integration scholarship.

First, classic contributions to implementation literature have established a direct relationship between the difficulty in implementing programmes and the number of actors involved. The already mentioned *joint action* problems in Pressman and Wildavsky's seminal work (1973) are the most prominent example. Other classic works such as *implementation structures* by Hjern and Porter (Hjern & Porter, 1981) point towards similar issues. Here, adopting a bottom-up perspective, the authors conceptualize "implementation structures" as ample networks of actors, often informal, ad-hoc, and non-hierarchical. In these structures, administrative-hierarchical logics are seldom central and must be negotiated with others specific to the programmes being implemented. Quoting Busetti and Dente (2018) "one should not expect cooperative behaviour on the part of implementers" because actors "have their own interests and agendas, not necessarily congruent with those

of policy implementation”. It is clear, thus, that the more actors are added to the process, the more fragmentation should be expected.

This issue links to a second aspect, that of bureaucratic behaviour when facing the implementation of reforms. This element is central in prominent implementation research, and we can link it to policy integration, especially when integrated policy designs involve reforming the routines of actors in complex governance frameworks. Bardach’s “implementation games” is a classic example of a diverse array of behavioural patterns typical of administrations (1977). Many of such games share the common denominator of inertia, or similar forms of resistance to change, when facing attempts to reform bureaucratic practices. Such attempts to safeguard the status quo during implementation might take form as different phenomena. For example, public officials typically resist sharing resources, as the economic model of public administration is not maximisation of profit, but rather maximisation of *budgets* (Niskanen, 1968, 1994). This typically leads to a monopolistic approach to public policy implementation, that conflicts with policy integration attempts. Another example is the tendency of implementers to act in a defensive, legalistic manner as a safeguard against uncertainty and potential negative outcomes (Bardach & Kagan, 1982). Linked to policy integration, this suggests caution when trying to assess the implementation of integrated policies. Programmes’ directives can be met formally but, at the same time, implementers can still minimize substantial change to the status-quo. Similar kind of resistance to change can thus be expected to contribute to the emergence of implementation gaps in policy integration attempts.

Lastly, recent contributions from the institutionalist literature offer some additional hints that can help us bridge the implementation gap in policy integration literature. Among the structural aspects that have been inquired, *polity* is central (Sager & Gofen, 2022). As the structural arrangement of institutions, polity regulates the distribution of power among actors. Thus, we can hold that any design aiming to shift this arrangement by the introduction of further integration, must also account for the existence of structural constraints set by the polity. An example of similar tendencies is also found in Steinbacher (2025) where cooperation is linked to the structural allowance for bureaucratic discretion. Finally, reshaping policymaking towards more integrated models also implies overcoming *legacies* and *path dependencies*. Following the classic historical institutionalist tradition, past events can have important implication on current policymaking, including policy implementation (Nesti & Graziano, 2025). It is thus reasonable to expect that in

institutional system characterized by fragmentation, integration attempts could find resistance to be implemented.

“It's tiresome. Constantly swinging a sledgehammer at the façade, just to get a glimpse through the cracks”

- Tom Yates, House of Cards, Chapter 39

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter presents the *research philosophy*, the *methodology*, and the *methods* that this dissertation relies on. It's the foundation upon which the empirical research is built, and the lens through which it can be understood.

Philosophy is the “*Ph*” in “*Ph.D.*”, and its importance is both *scientific* and *personal*. Scientifically, recent advancement in the methodological debate have largely moved from the contention around specific *methods*, to the debate around *philosophies* of research (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Illari et al., 2011; Wagenaar, 2014; Jackson, 2016; Danermark et al., 2019; Jackson & Dolan, 2021; Fryer & Navarrete, 2024). The social sciences community has largely quenched the qualitative-quantitative conflict and embraced a pluralistic view about research methods. Different studies use different methods to achieve different goals. And it's fine. What matters the most is choosing methods that are coherent with our understanding of *what science is*. This perspective holds that methodological choices *always* have philosophical underpinnings, regardless of the researcher's consciousness about it. Presenting my own position in the philosophical pantheon achieves different results: it shows awareness about the centrality of the philosophy-methodology relation; and it justifies the operational choices adopted for the analysis. Personally, knowing that many ideas exist about knowledge, and that all of them can have a seat at the table of “science”, is an exercise in open-mindedness that is useful within and without the work environment. Underlying this chapter also transpires a process of personal growth that took place during the path of my doctoral studies.

In the following, I will position my research within the *critical realist* philosophy of science. Following the established debate on research philosophy,

the philosophical part will be split in two sections. The first about *ontology*, and the second about *epistemology*. Ontology is the branch of philosophy of science that handles concepts such as *reality*, *being*, *truth*. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy of science that deals with *knowledge*, its making, and its use. The remainder of the chapter will then present the *methodology* and *methods* that the research relies on. Methodology is understood as the translation of research philosophy into research practice. It presents the qualitative nature of this research and positions it among the different traditions and understandings of qualitative research. The main focus is to specify what the analysis can (and cannot) do and outline the design of the research. Lastly, the section on methods, present the specific ways to operationalize methodology in action. This includes a presentation of the type of interviews and the way they have been conducted, the secondary sources used to complement the interviews, and a thorough discussion of the kind of analysis the data has been put through.

3.1. Ontology of critical realism

The *third way* philosophy

Ontology is the branch of philosophy that deals with issues such as *what reality is* and *what kind of things exist* or not. One could argue that for most things surrounding us similar questions are trivial. But things start to change when we put such questions against big and important things. What is *poverty*? Is it the result of a system that forces the rich to be richer, and the poor to be poorest? Or is it just the result of laziness and bad decisions? Now *these* are interesting ontological questions. Important things in our lives (taxes, services, welfare, etc.) depend on where our governors' position in the debate.

The same is true for *science*. One of the key lessons I learned during my doctoral path is that everything about science is contested. There are different ideas of what science is, and what it is not. This paragraph will present my ontological position in the conduction of scientific research, which finds its place in the space opened by the *critical realist* philosophical approach.

Before going deeper into the characters of critical realism, I think it's important to discuss the issue of labels. Research philosophy is ridden with labels. Positivism, constructionism, idealism, subjectivism, realism, pragmatism. The list could go on for countless pages (see Dancy, 1992). New labels get pushed in the debate daily, and old labels get mixed and merged. Making things worse, it's hard to find two

people – renowned authors included – giving the same meaning to the same label. While reading individual pieces of literature on research philosophy can be engaging, the cumulative effect of labels leads to the generation of much noise. Barriers between approaches become fuzzy. Young researchers, like me, get lost. Yet, it's impossible to talk about research philosophy without joining the labels-game. For the sake of clarity (and of the readers' mental health as well as my own), I will do my best to keep this chapter simple. Not simplistic, or shallow. Just simple.

To start, *critical realism* is often understood as the middle-ground between objectivist and subjectivist approaches (ah, labels!) (Fryer & Navarrete, 2024). Objectivist philosophies of science are called as such because they believe reality is *objective*, existing regardless of what people think. Examples are the *positivist* and *neo-positivist* approaches. For objectivists, this reality not only exists, but can be unequivocally known, because humans can directly observe said reality empirically. On the opposite side, subjectivist positions refuse the existence of a reality “external” to the people's perception and believe everything around us is about *meaning* and *experience*. In other words, every person has their own reality. Examples are the *constructionists* or *interpretivist* approaches. But how can we go about science (or life!) if all we have is subjective meaning? The answer of subjectivists is that knowledge does exist (and so does science), but it just can't be objective. The debate between these opposing philosophical positions has been going on since the second half of the past century, often in a sum-zero game (see Jackson, 2016; Kincaid & Bouwel, 2023; Ongaro & Yang, 2024; Fryer & Navarrete, 2024). On one side, subjectivists blame positivists and other objectivist approaches for their acritical take on philosophy, and their tendency to portray objectivism as the best (if not the only) way to conduct science in a “scientific” way. On the other side, objectivists blame the subjectivists for their radical scepticism. If nothing exists besides subjective constructs, they hold, any effort towards science turns to be either partial, biased, or futile.

It must be said that in research practice the contraposition between the two sides of the debate can be far less conflictual than usually portrayed. From this point of view the field of political science has shown many examples of convergence between positivist and interpretivist approaches (Lawler & Waldner, 2023). It is inside this space for dialogue that a critical realist stance can express itself more successfully. In fact, the need to establish a dialogue between apparently irreconcilable positions is one of the points of departure for the emergence of this approach (P. T. Jackson, 2016, p. 72).

Critical realism originates from the works of the philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar (Bhaskar, 1975). In his book “*A realist theory of science*” Bhaskar makes the case for a philosophy of science that overcomes the shortcomings of positivistic science, without falling into complete relativisms (more on *how* this can be achieved in the paragraph about epistemology).

Being in the middle-ground, critical realism ontologically accepts the existence of objective reality, in line with other realisms (see Dancy, 1992), but accounts for the importance of meaning and experience in the process of knowledge formation (i.e.: epistemology). The former half qualifies the approach as *realist*, and the latter as *critical*. In other words, for critical realists there are things that exist in the world, and science should strive to get accurate representations of them. But we can’t perceive such things fully, nor impartially. There are always gaps to be filled by subjective interpretation.

Reality: the *layers*

The fundamental ontological question Bhaskar asks is the following: “What must the world look like for science to be possible?” (Bhaskar, 1975, p. 13) His answer is that reality has to be *layered* or *stratified*. Critical realist literature identifies three layers: the *empirical*, the *actual*, and the *real* (Bhaskar, 1975; Archer, 1995; Gorski, 2013; Fletcher, 2017; Fryer & Navarrete, 2024; Ongaro & Yang, 2024) (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 – Stratification of reality.

	Layers of reality		
	Empirical layer	Actual layer	Real layer
Experiences	X	X	X
Events		X	X
Mechanisms			X
Structures			X

Source: Author’s elaboration on Bhaskar (1975, p. 2).

The *empirical* layer is the domain of *experience*. It’s the part of reality that individuals perceive. That is, for example, direct witness of events taking place, or the collection of accounts. For research, it’s the layer of data. Importantly, this is the layer where imagination, meaning, and subjectivity come into play. Thus, the empirical layer is always “filtered” through interpretation of the individual observer.

The *actual* layer of reality is the domain of *events*. This is the layer where entities engage in activities, for example: atoms (entity) moving into space

(activity); a football player (entity) kicking a ball (activity); a city council (entity) voting a motion (activity). The main difference with the empirical layer is that events can happen even when they are not observed empirically.

The *real* layer is the domain of *mechanisms* and *structures*, and it's where causality happens. Structures are the characteristics of reality that enable or constrain the activity of entities or, in other words, define the "freedom of movement" of an entity. An example: the activity of a city council is regulated by *institutions* (structures), in the form of rules that define what the council can or cannot decide about, and how. Institutions *enable* the council to decide but also *constrain* its ways to do so.

Lastly, mechanisms are the characteristic of reality that define the causal pattern of events. Of course, just because a city council *can* take decisions, it doesn't mean it *will*. As well as two city councils with the same institutions can decide things differently. This tells us that structure alone is not responsible for causing an event (e.g.: a decision). Something else must be in between. That "something" is a causal mechanism. This is where things get more complicated. In our example, it's likely that *many* mechanisms act at the same time – cognitive, social, economic, political, and more – triggering a council to take a decision, or not. Here, we can already see hints of the complexity characterizing the study of mechanisms in social sciences. This is why the topic will be dedicated a specific paragraph below. For now, the main point is establishing that mechanisms *are* and what they *do*. They *are* something different to structures and events, and yet they *connect* the two together.

Social world: agency and structure

In its early form, the critical realist approach has developed as a type of *naturalism*. This meant an attempt to provide a philosophy comprising social, human, and natural science under the same common principles (Bhaskar, 1979). Soon, however, the necessity for a more nuanced adaptation to human and social sciences emerged. For social sciences, among many other important authors (Porpora, 1987; Collier, 1994; Porpora, 2015; Danermark et al., 2019), the most important contribution is perhaps the one from Margaret Archer (1995, 2015, 2024).

Archer's contribution is particularly relevant for critical realist social scientists because it qualifies the agency-structure debate inside the scope of critical realist layered reality. Also here, the argument develops around a middle-ground claim

compared to the three mainstream approaches, all faulted by what Archer defines *conflation* (see Archer, 1995 Chapters 2, 3 and 4).

“Upwards conflation” is typical of methodologically individualist disciplines (e.g.: psychology, classical economics), which consider the absolute primacy of agency over structure. Here agents dominate social interactions, and structures are reduced to mere aggregates of individuals. “Downwards conflation” is typical of methodologically holist disciplines (e.g.: Durkheimian sociology as well as Marxist) in which structure dominates agency. Here social structure is a deterministic cage imposing strict boundaries to individual action. “Central conflation”, lastly, critiques Giddens’s (1986) attempt to reconcile agency and structure through his theory of *structuration*. This position is closer to Archer’s interpretation, but the main criticism is that structuration crushes agency and structure together and it’s not clear how to discern one from the other.

With reference to the layered reality (see Table 3.1 above) critical realists place agency in the actual layer, and structure in the real layer (Bhaskar, 1979; Collier, 1994; Fryer & Navarrete, 2024). Ontologically, both are part of reality, and exist as separate things. At the same time, there is interdependency between the two, they are related. As we have seen, structure determines a series of enabling and constraining conditions that shape individual behaviour. On the other side, actors can deviate from structural rules, change them, or even create new ones.

To understand the interplay between agency and structure in critical realist terms, take the following example. Imagine you have to choose where to go on vacation. Your Country’s diplomatic relations define which Countries accept your passport, and upon which visa procedures. These are structural conditions because they exist regardless of your awareness or your actions. They are *real*. Structural conditions exercise an “external” power over your choice: a “strong” passport will *enable* you to visit a good number of exotic countries with simplified visa procedures; a “weak” passport will *constrain* your choice by doing the opposite. At the same time, agency has a strong influence on the decision: your motivation (and skill) to undertake complicated visa requests plays a key role in that decision. That means that agency can overcome (at least in part) structural constraints.

Critical realists identify the relation between structure and agency in an interactive, non-deterministic way. Both shape each other over time. Agency and structure produce each other through reciprocal interaction. This is generally understood as “TMSA”, the *Transformational Model of Social Activity*. In this

model, social structures enable and constrain agency (aka the process of *socialization*) while agency reproduces or transforms social structures (Bhaskar, 1979; Collier, 1994). In other words, while structure tends to be “rigid” and resistant to change, it is not immutable or generated in the void. On the contrary, there are processes of *morphogenesis* or *morphostasis* by which agents dynamically reform or reinforce the existing rules (Archer, 2024).

To conclude, for critical realists the relationship between agency and structure is particularly complex. Transformation and reproduction – morphogenesis and morphostasis – are not to be intended as “either-or”, but rather as “both-and”. Following Collier (1994, p. 146) we can use language as a telling example of this dynamic. Language is a social structure: it serves a primarily social function (communicate) and consist of somewhat rigid, shared rules. Every time agents speak, they reproduce and reaffirm such rules. At the same time, while reproducing language, agents also change its rules in a slow, incremental way (willingly or not). As a result, languages change trough the course of generations.

Summing up: 1) structure and agency exist in the world as part of reality; 2) social behaviour by agents is always constrained or enabled by structural conditions; 3) structure is “rigid” but can be changed trough the action of social agents.

Causality: mechanisms

To conclude the section about ontology, I will now discuss the topic of mechanisms. The concept of mechanism is central to critical realism because it represents the way in which causality is understood ontologically. The importance of causality is paramount in any philosophy of science. If science has to do with explaining the world we live in, then causality is perhaps the most important part of it, because it’s the way we understand how facts relate to one another.

Historically, the debate on causality in the philosophy of science has been dominated by the *constant conjunction* approach, also known as “Humeanistic”, from 18th century philosopher David Hume. The constant conjunction rationale understands causation as regular co-variation in empirically observed phenomena. In orthodox applications of this doctrine, science is understood as the process extrapolating stable laws from these observed regularities, with the goal of predicting other instances. This has long been, and still is, the main frame for causal inference in positivism and other objectivist approaches to science. At the core of

these approaches lies the same philosophical understanding of causality: causality is to be found in a stable pattern of events, where change in an independent variable X determines change in a dependent variable Y.

Yet, recent developments in many disciplines (social and natural sciences alike) have started to question the hegemony of the causal conjunction model, giving new imprint to the scientific debate (Illari et al., 2011). There is overall agreement that the constant conjunction model can (and does) deliver accurate and powerful explanations and predictions of natural and social facts. Still, modern scientific developments have highlighted some of its flaws, especially related to highly complex fields of inquiry. In these fields, like social sciences, it's particularly hard to reduce scientific inquiry to few selected and manipulable variables, and the constant conjunction model has proven to be less reliable. Such instances have put into question the ability of the model to produce effective explanations.

The main alternative to the conjunction model is represented by theories about *causal mechanisms*. To say it with Gerring (2008, p. 178) while the conjunction approach seeks to explain “*if X caused Y*”, the mechanistic approach focuses on “*why X might cause Y*”. Making things more complex, however, the debate on social mechanisms is rather fractured and a variety of approaches exist (see Mahoney, 2001; Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010). Notwithstanding these fractures, causal mechanisms have had a vast success, in virtue of their effectiveness in the explanation of social events.

Operating some simplification, we can distinguish two main types of ontological understanding of causal mechanisms. One, which we could call *actualist* sees mechanisms as mere chains of events. The other, which we could call *structuralist* sees mechanisms as separated entities, a distinct feature of reality. Most theorizations in the literature can be put somewhere in the middle, yet the typology represents a heuristic guide-scheme. Table 3.2 presents a non-exhaustive selection of definitions, aiming to portray such variety of ontological positionings in relation to mechanisms.

The definitions in Table 3.2 are distributed from actualist (top) to structuralist (bottom). In Tilly (2001) we can see as the identification of mechanisms as a “class of events”. Little (2011) and Beach and Pedersen (2019) propose a more nuanced approach, where mechanisms are not strictly equated to events, being a “system” or “configuration”, but the elements composing them are essentially identified as events. Positions like Gerring (2008), Elster (2007) stay somewhere in between,

focusing on “pathways” or “patterns”. These definitions are vaguer than the previous, and (at least in principle) can account for mechanisms as something other than a mere succession of events. Lastly, positions such as George and Bennett (2005) lean on a more explicitly a structural definition of mechanisms. Here, mechanisms are “processes” connecting agents to structural conditions that are external to them.

Table 3.2 – Selection of representative definitions of causal mechanisms, from actualist (top) to structuralist (bottom).

Authors	Definition of causal mechanism
(Tilly, 2001)	“Mechanisms form a delimited class of events that change relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations. [...] Processes are frequently occurring combinations or sequences of mechanisms.”
(Beach & Pedersen, 2019)	“Systems of interlocking parts that transmit powers or forces between a cause (or a set of causes) to an outcome. [...] Each of the parts of the mechanism can be described in terms of entities that engage in activities”
(Little, 2011)	“(i) A particular configuration of conditions and processes that (ii) always or normally leads from one set of conditions to an outcome (iii) through the properties and powers of the events and entities in the domain of concern”
(Gerring, 2008)	“The pathway or process by which an effect is produced or a purpose is accomplished”
(Elster, 2007)	“Frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal patterns that are triggered under generally unknown conditions.”
(George & Bennett, 2005)	“Ultimately unobservable physical, social, or psychological processes through which agents with causal capacities operate, but only in specific contexts or conditions”

Source: Author’s own elaboration

This separation between events and mechanisms as separate objects is perhaps the main contribution of critical realism to the debate on mechanisms (see also Archer, 2015). Especially from the point of view of social sciences, this represents an important standing point, allowing for a broader picture of causality in the social realm which includes not only events (i.e.: agency) but also social structures. If one had to take a purely actualist stance on mechanism, it would follow that the absence of events implies absence of mechanisms. This is especially challenging because in complex social and political processes mechanisms can be “invisible” for at least two reasons. 1) They are active but don’t generate events because of other competing mechanism; or 2) events are there but they’re impossible to perceive from the researcher’s empirical point of observation.

Critical realism sees the structural understanding of mechanisms as a scientific necessity, given the complexity of reality where multiple causal patterns are co-

occurring. In other words, we must accept that mechanisms can exist even when we can't have experience of them (anti-empiricism) or they don't produce effects (anti-actualism). Of course, completely hidden mechanisms will be obscure to researchers to the point of being impossible to inquire. However, this is an epistemological problem (as discussed later in the text) rather than ontological.

This considered, it has to be said that key critical realist literature remains rather cryptic and obscure when it comes to conceptualizing mechanism more precisely. While it's convincing that mechanisms are something more than actions, in early conceptualizations mechanisms are almost conflated with structures (Bhaskar, 1975, 1979; Archer, 1995). More recent developments have then clarified that, for critical realist social science, mechanisms are the *dynamic* characteristics that connect structures and agents in a causal pattern, shaping a course of events (Easton, 2010; Hartwig, 2015; D. V. Porpora, 2015; Fletcher, 2017; Danermark et al., 2019; Ongaro & Yang, 2024).

Besides the structuralist-actualist fracture, another divide is between deterministic and non-deterministic mechanisms, emerging particularly well in the disciplinary field of political science (Mahoney, 2001; Elster, 2007; Gerring, 2010; Tilly, 2001; Falletti & Lynch, 2009; Dente, 2011; Capano et al., 2019).

The first group of approaches follows a deterministic ontology, as discussed in detail in the work of Beach and Pedersen on process tracing (2019). Deterministic because the mechanism preserves important law-like characters that are inherited from the conjunctive model of causality. Although replacing the terminology inherited from statistics (e.g.: dependent/independent variables) with a more case-oriented one (e.g.: cause/outcome), the mechanism is conceptualized close to an intervening variable (or a series of them) between cause and outcome. *Deterministic* means that the outcome of a mechanism is highly stable, and thus predictable. Mechanisms, in this conception, are usually represented as detailed and predictable chains of events which are then put through strict logical testing in order to confirm or falsify their law-like character (Beach & Pedersen, 2019; Busetti, 2016; Weaver, 2019; Capano et al., 2019).

Critics of this approach have underlined some of its flaws, questioning ontological determinism. For example, Gerring (2010) argues that treating mechanisms as deterministic, testable patterns works best when the cause and outcome of the process are really close, meaning they are separated by a very short causal gap. This brings mechanisms back into a "causal conjunction" style of

understanding, where a mechanism is little more than one or few intervening variables between X and Y. Taken to the extreme “in the analysis of very proximate covariational relationships – where little causal distance separates X and Y – there may be no point in testing causal mechanisms at all because the pathway is already more or less self-evident” (Gerring, 2010, p. 1506). However, the author then proceeds to discuss other causal relations, the “intractable” ones, where causal distance is greater and never thoroughly testable. These are the typical complex and irrational dynamics found in political processes, that hold an element of stochastic unpredictability and whose outcomes are always context-dependent (Falleti & Lynch, 2009; Gerring, 2010; Bennett & Mishkin, 2022). Analysing these mechanisms requires to depart from the deterministic understanding of mechanisms, and adopt a non-deterministic one:

“We argue that mechanisms, as portable concepts distinct from the variables attached to particular cases, operate in different contexts. And because mechanisms interact with the contexts in which they operate, the outcomes of the process cannot be determined a priori by knowing the type of mechanism that is at work” (Falleti & Lynch, 2009, p. 1147).

The same mechanism can thus have different outcomes based on the context in which it takes place. If, then, mechanisms are not simple chain of events that repeat over time in a deterministic way given the same variables – or, as in Beach and Pedersen “entities engaging in activities” (2019) – they assume a more “macro” dimension. Mechanisms as “portable concepts” are placed at a slightly higher level of abstraction than chains of events/variables and are typically represented in the form of an expression made of one or few words (i.e.: brokerage, coordination, learning, feedback, emulation, etc.). Falleti and Lynch (2009) themselves provide a list of examples (p. 1150) but others can be found in the literature (e.g.: Little, 2011; Bennett & Mishkin, 2022; Melloni, 2025). These concepts are “portable”, meaning that they can be applied across a spectrum of cases to provide social explanations, although the outcome will vary based on the contexts in which the mechanisms take place.

Grounding this view of mechanisms in realist ontology, portability is what Gerring refers to with “might” when saying that mechanistic explanations focus on “why X might cause Y” (Gerring, 2008). Critical realist scholars refer to this concept as *tendency* (Bhaskar, 1975; Collier, 1994; Groff, 2011; Archer, 2015). Tendencies are what we refer colloquially in expressions such as “male cats *tend to* be bigger than females”, “political parties *tend to* position themselves around key

societal cleavages”. Mechanisms *tend to* generate events. This is not to be understood as a loose (or lazy) way to approach causal explanation. On the contrary, it represents the only viable way to explain the “untractable” causal connections in many aspects of social and political research.

As a last knot to untangle, in such a variety of approaches to social mechanisms the list of “portable concepts” deployable as mechanisms is potentially infinite. This is why, perhaps, alongside a hypertrophic debate about the definition of mechanisms, no contribute has yet attempted to “list” all the mechanisms up to date. Although some mechanisms have proven to be particularly successful (e.g.: path dependence, emulation, learning) given their portability to numerous cases in the experience of political processes, the list could be stretched over the horizon. In Gerring’s words:

“One finds a litany of theoretically plausible causal mechanisms, most of which have been extensively debated in the literature. [...] It should also be noted that many of these mechanisms might be further disaggregated, or differently aggregated. Categories (which are largely dependent on our vocabulary) are often squishy, introducing an element of indeterminacy” (Gerring, 2010, p. 1510)

While it’s established scientific practice to try and link empirical observations to already conceptualized mechanisms, the literature in political and social science already offers an uncountable number of mechanisms. This makes mechanistic analysis a particularly troubled water to navigate through. One escape way to this problem is framework proposed by Bennet and Mishkin (2022). Closely to the critical realist ontological position about mechanisms (i.e.: the dynamic entity that relates agents and structures in a social/political process), the authors develop a taxonomy of mechanisms acting as a framework to navigate mechanistic analysis. They build a 4x3 matrix based on two dimensions. The first is the type of relationship the mechanisms are linking, in the four combinations of agency and structure (agent-agent; agent-structure; structure-agent: structure structure). The second dimension is the main decisional logic driving the process, the “rationale”. Three types of rationales are presented, respectively legitimacy (norms, identities, ideas, values, etc.); material power (money, coercion, information control, etc.); and functional efficiency (transactional costs). Table 3.3 presents the taxonomy of Bennett and Mishkin, with one example per type among the ones provided in the authors’ work.

Table 3.3 – Bennett & Mishkin’s framework for causal mechanisms in political science

		Agent – Structure relationship			
		Agent to agent	Structure to agent	Agent to structure	Structure to Structure
Rationale	Legitimacy	<i>Emulation</i> (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983)	<i>Nuclear taboo</i> (Tannenwald, 1999)	<i>Routinization and Habit</i> (Bourdieu, 1977)	<i>Unintended evolution of social norms</i> (Ingiriis & Hoehne, 2013)
	Material power	<i>Principal-agent</i> (Miller, 2005)	<i>Resources as enablement and constraints</i> (Jenkins, 1983)	<i>Revolution</i> (Skocpol, 1979)	<i>Power transition</i> (Gilpin, 1991)
	Functional efficiency	<i>Diffusion</i> (Elkins & Simmons, 2005)	<i>Evolutionary selection</i> (Currie et al., 2010)	<i>Innovation</i> (Solow, 1957)	<i>Adverse selection</i> (Akerlof, 1970)

Source: author’s elaboration on Bennett & Mishkin (2022, p. 169)

As shown in Table 3.3, the framework of Bennet and Mishkin provides us a tool to extricate the entanglement of theories about social mechanisms. The framework allows for a great flexibility in the deployment of “portable concepts” in mechanistic explanations, provided they fit into one of the quadrants. Different theories thus become *tools* for the production of knowledge trough social explanation.

3.2. Epistemology of critical realism

Knowledge: the middle ground

As we have seen in the previous section, critical realism is placed somewhere in the middle of the continuum between objectivist and subjectivist philosophical traditions. But what does this mean in terms of knowledge and how it’s produced (aka epistemology)? Following Fryer and Navarrette (2024) we can draw a line between *direct* and *indirect* epistemologies. Direct epistemologies state that it’s possible to observe reality empirically, and to draw (*infer*) conclusions from it. Science is then a matter of systematization of data in search for patterns. Anything which cannot be observed directly is to be considered outside of the scope of scientific inquiry. Indirect epistemologies, on the other hand, believe observation always implies a degree of subjective interpretation. This degree varies according to different schools of thought and can range widely.

A typical example of a direct epistemology is logical positivism (see Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Creath, 2023; Kincaid, 2023). Among the elements that

characterize its epistemology two are particularly important: empiricism, and its approach to theory. Empiricism implies a belief that only directly observable (and thus measurable) facts represent reliable data for scientific inquiry. Anything else (i.e.: unobservables) are to be left out of the picture. Observables are a matter of science, unobservable are a matter of metaphysics. With regards to theory, logical positivism is pursuing the quest for law-like statements and theory verification. Knowledge comes from induction and the identification of patterns, from which is possible to theorize general laws. Such laws, then, are used to form predictive statements about the world in probabilistic terms (Carnap, 1950). The validity of scientific findings is thus achieved by repetition of similar studies with similar results (i.e.: principle of verification).

Over time, this approach has lost part of its dominance and appeal. In the wider frame, philosophy of science has first shifted from verification to falsification approach (Popper, 1959), and then recognized science as an inherently social process (Kuhn, 1996). Also in the narrower disciplinary frame of social sciences, logical positivism has been confronted with growing scepticism both from within and without its community of practice (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Kincaid, 2023).

All these factors have brought towards the emergence of *indirect* epistemologies. In general, indirect epistemologies go beyond empiricism and accept the non-neutrality of the observer (Ongaro & Yang, 2024). In other words, it's possible to go beyond the direct perception of our senses, and observation will always include an element of subjectivity as well as the influence of existing presuppositions. In the various languages of scientific practice we can say that observations are “epistemologically relative” or “theory-laden” (Easton, 2010; Ongaro & Yang, 2024), but we can further divide indirect epistemologies in the *theory-dependent*, and *theory-determined* types (Fryer & Navarrete, 2024).

The more moderate positions follow a theory-dependent approach. Among the more prudent is, for example neo-positivism (see Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; P. T. Jackson & Dolan, 2021; Kincaid, 2023). Neo-positivists adopt an indirect epistemology while retaining strong ties to the original positivist doctrine. On the one hand, they abandon strict empiricism and the belief in value-free research, allowing for some degree of reflexivity to enter scientific inquiry. These elements are nonetheless kept under very strict control and have secondary importance against the primacy of direct empirical evidence. On the other hand, neo-positivists hang on to the law-like understanding of theory in a probabilistic/predictive fashion.

In contrast to neo-positivism (theory-dependent), constructionism is an example of theory-determined epistemology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). Put simply, constructionism and other subjectivist approaches hold that what we consider as “reality” is nothing else than a construct built from theories in which we already believe, explicitly or implicitly. Money is a classic example. The value of money is not “real” per se, it’s a social construct built on and reproduced by economic theories in which we already believe. Consequently, there is no objective knowledge to be discovered. All we know is socially *constructed* and knowledge is thus relative. For subjectivists the role of science is not about finding laws (as for positivists), but collecting experiences, challenging mainstream assumptions, and voicing the (often sidelined) actors involved in political processes.

Once again, critical realism emerges as a third way philosophy in between the two poles. It shares a theory-dependent approach to knowledge with neo-positivists, based on the acceptance that external reality exists and can be known, but only partially and indirectly. At the same time critical realism departs significantly from neo-positivism in some key respects. These include the approach to theory development, and a stronger focus on unobservables such as structures and mechanisms. This positions critical realism closer to other subjective epistemologies (e.g. constructionism), without sharing their relativism. In other words, while accepting that knowledge can be built from multiple competing theories (rooted in cultures, values, beliefs, etc.), not all of them hold the same weight. The added value of science is precisely that of weighting different theories and finding out which one(s) offer the better explanation for what we observe and perceive empirically.

The *iceberg*: making sense of the unobservable

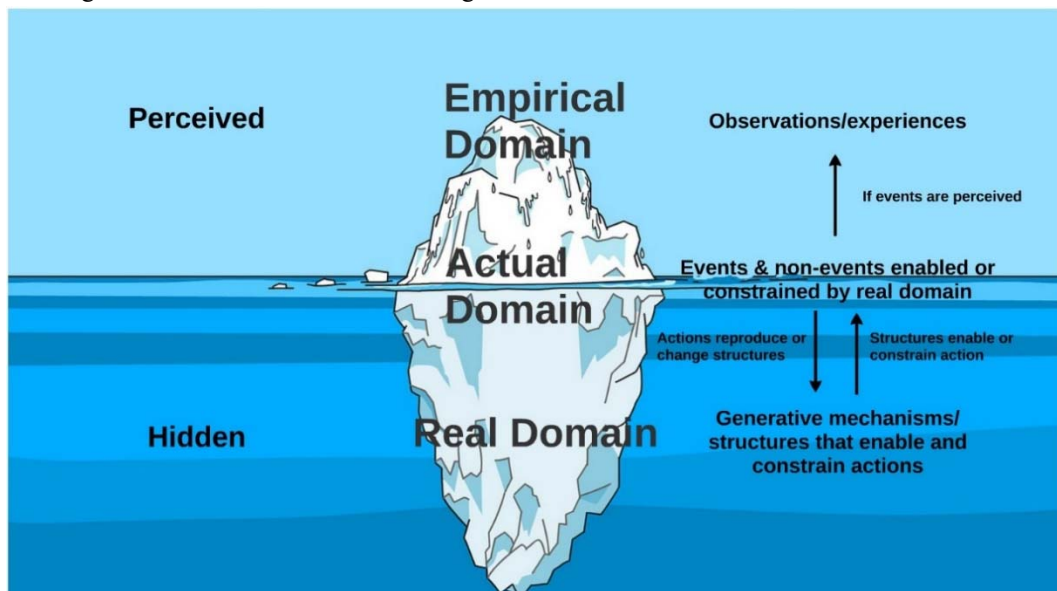
One of the main starting points of critical realist epistemology is the difference between open and closed systems. The distinction goes roughly along the following lines. Closed systems are scientific environments characterized by the possibility to isolate real features of the world and selectively observe and manipulate such elements under inquiry. The laboratory experiment is the stereotype of a closed system research. Open systems, conversely, are the scientific environments where reality cannot be completely isolated by the observer, nor manipulated. Human societies are perhaps the most obvious example of open systems, but more inconspicuous can be found, such as ecosystems. Common to all open systems is the impossibility to reproduce them in experiments, without substantial

simplifications that change their nature. In open systems, therefore, experiments cannot be the gold-standard of scientific inquiry. There is a need to account for complexity.

The tricky character of open systems is that we cannot make sense of all their parts empirically (i.e.: based on direct experience). Some things (often important things) just can't be empirically observed. They are the *unobservables*. *Social causation* (and so mechanisms) is a typical example of an unobservable for critical realists. Of course, empirical observation still plays an important role as the point of departure of scientific inquiry. But there is more to causality than plain empirical facts.

To picture this more vividly, scientific inquiry in critical realism can be represented as an *iceberg* (Figure 3.1) (Fletcher, 2017; Anderson, 2020; Stutchbury, 2022). The iceberg represents the 3 layers of reality (empirical actual, real) discussed in the previous section. The water represents the epistemology, partially submerging the iceberg and preventing direct observation. Like an iceberg, the emerging part (i.e.: empirical observation) is only a small portion of reality. This surface part is necessary to perceive the existence of deeper strata of reality. It also offers essential clues to guess what's below the water but is not sufficient to grasp the full extent of reality on its own.

Figure 3.1 – The critical realist iceberg



Source: (Anderson, 2020)

But how can we make sense of unobservables, if we cannot directly observe them? Critical realism makes the case that it's possible by means of *abductive* reasoning, in a specific fashion known as *retroduction*, which will be detailed in the section below.

Theory development: abduction and retroduction

In political science, and in policy studies specifically, the definition of (and approach to) theory moves from the positivist tradition and is still strongly grounded in this philosophic approach. In seminal texts like Sabatier (2007), we see a distinction between “common sense” and “scientific” theory. Proper scientific theory is only the one that is logically ordered in sets of concepts and propositions to formulate testable hypotheses. All the rest is ruled out as common sense, which is important, but *un-scientific*.

This highlights the positivist roots of the discipline, firmly entrenched in the hypothetico-deductive approach based on *replication* and *testing*. Replication refers to the assumption that different researchers applying similar designs to similar data should reach similar conclusions. Testing refers to a research process starting from the definition of formal theoretical propositions (hypotheses) in the form of “*if A, then B*” based on existing theory, to be falsified or verified empirically. At the practical level this means translating the hypotheses into empirically measurable factors (dependent and independent variables).

Over time, many voices have started to question the exclusion of other approaches from the title of *scientificity*. Famously, Dudley and Parsons (Dudley et al., 2000), which have highlighted the short-sightedness of such approach, excluding from the circle of “science” prominent realist, pragmatist, and interpretive approaches to the studies of policymaking (especially from outside the American tradition). Today, the centrality of the positivist hypothetico-deductive model is still prominent, but a general consensus have been reached about a larger understanding of what's *scientific*. This includes, besides the hypothetico-deductive tests, other alternatives such as “sense-making”, “learning”, and “summarizing” (Weible, 2023, p. 10)

Critical realist perspectives fit in this space, allowing for a different interpretation of what theory is and how it can be developed. Following Danermark and colleagues (Danermark et al., 2019, pp. 135–165) theory in critical realism can be defined in four statements: theory is a scientific *language*; this language includes

an interpretation of social reality and serves as an *interpretive framework*; such interpretation follows a logic of *explanation* in the at the level of structures, mechanisms, and agency; and theories generalize through *abstraction*, rather than regularity.

First, understanding of theory as a form of “language” implies accepting theory not as the primary *source* of knowledge, but rather as a way to *translate* real-world problems in scientific terms. It’s a way to understand and inquire problems in an orderly way, and reason about them in abstract terms. I have already discussed this approach in the opening of Chapter 2.

Second, the *use* of theory as “interpretive framework” implies the acceptance of competing theories as valid explanatory tools for social dynamics. This is what Ongaro and Yang (2024) mean by “being agnostic about the absolute truth of any given theory about the world”. Here *agnosticism* doesn’t mean relativism, but rather the acceptance that multiple competing theories in scientific explanation can be true at the same time. The acceptance of different theories is not problematic for critical realists. On the contrary, they serve as a “toolbox”. Nearly all scientific inquiry can refer to multiple frameworks for interpretation (Danermark et al., 2019, p. 160). Approaching theory from this perspective can help in the production of more nuanced explanations of the puzzling dynamics of our societies. Drawing elements from each theory can offer better interpretations and stronger explanations for the dynamics taking place on the field. This “toolbox” approach is not specific to critical realism but shared with other methodological traditions such as “analyticism” (P. T. Jackson, 2016) or “explaining-outcome” process tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). The textbook example of the application of the “toolbox” approach is Allison’s seminal study on the Cuban missile crisis (Allison, 1971) in which the author explains the same case from theoretical perspectives that are contrasting, and yet all valid. Critical realist analysis starts from the belief that “accounting for the determination of complex objects in open systems necessarily involves an “eclectic” mix of theories” (Steinmetz, 1998).

Third, the focus of theory development is *explanatory*, because the end goal of science is to explain the world we live in. While multiple theories can coexist and about the same social phenomena, not all theories hold the same weight. This is a common dilemma of scientific inquiry and public opinion, when opposite theories clash. Narrowing science to *confirmatory* and *falsificatory* logics will not solve the issue, as it’s known that no theory can pass a definitive falsification or confirmation test. All we can do is saying that one theory *explains* reality better than the others.

But this argument is built on *abductive* premises rather than hypothetico-deductive. Abduction, also known as “inference to the best explanation” is the thought process we apply when we rule out alternatives based on the ones which account for more evidence (Thomas, 2015; Hartwig, 2015; Ritz, 2020).

Lastly, one relevant element linked to theory development is *generalization*. While hypothetico-deductive approaches rely on a generalization as *empirical prediction*, critical realists rely on generalization as *abstraction*. These can be also termed “empirical generalization” and “theoretical generalization” (Shapiro, 2007; Danermark et al., 2019). Empirical generalization is “general” in the sense of directly observed regularities, that are then assumed to predict similar instances. Theoretical generalization is “general” in the sense it loosely matches a typical pattern. It’s what we do when we find the moral of a story. Icarus flies too close to the sun. Brutus kills his father. Ebenezer Scrooge realizes how selfish he was. Stories tell nothing about empirical regularity. Still, we can abstract “general” concepts from such stories – *overachieving*, *betrayal*, and *redemption* – that can be used as tools to explain a broad range of events that loosely relate to the original story.

Both empirical and abstract generalization have a place in social science. General statements of the empirical kind are typical of the positivist tradition. They can be developed either *deductively* (theory-testing) or *inductively* (theory-building). Conversely, general statements of the abstract kind are typical outside the positivist circle. They subsume the unobservable characters hidden below empirical observations with abductive logic. In critical realism, some authors identify a peculiar type of abduction they call *retroduction* (Hartwig, 2015; Danermark et al., 2019; Ritz, 2020; Mukumbang, 2023). Retroduction is a type of abduction dedicated to identifying mechanisms at the intersection of agency and structures. From the critical realist perspective, it’s the more complete form of explanation of social events.

Both the critical realist and positivist approaches to theory have been used widely across social disciplines. They present strengths and limitations, are used in different types of research activity, and take advantage of different skillsets (Table 3.4). Following Danermark (2019) I want to highlight the complementarity between these two traditions, as well as all the others which, for reasons of scope and space, could not be included in this discussion (e.g.: pragmatism, constructivism, critical theory, etc.). Nonetheless, given the prominence of the positivist approach in policy studies especially, I felt necessary to present my position in comparison to the

mainstream. This is essential to understand the methodological and operational choices, as well as understand the principles guiding this research.

Table 3.4 – positivist and critical realist approaches to theory development (continues in the next page)

Philosophy of science	Positivism		Critical realism	
Theory development approach	Deductive	Inductive	Abductive	Retroductive
Scope	Test existing knowledge against empirical cases	Build knowledge based on repeated empirical observation	Finding the best explanation of a puzzling fact	Subsuming the mechanisms explaining patterns of events
Type of question answered	Does Theory X hold on to its prediction in the observed cases?	What predictive patterns can be extrapolated from the sample to a larger population?	What must have happened, given what I am observing?	What unobservable mechanisms account for the course of events I observe?
Strengths	Uses formal logic and syntax Relies on highly structured and established research protocols Relies on measurable variables and indicators	Produces statistical predictions Relies on highly structured and established research protocols Relies on measurable variables and indicators	Compares different theories in open systems Provides explanations when complexity is not reducible Weighs competing theories even when testing is not pursuable	Generates knowledge on unobservable aspects Compares different theories in open systems Provides explanations when complexity is not reducible Weighs competing theories even when testing is not pursuable
Limitations	The analysis is limited by the prior assumptions Conclusion are limited to the empirical observation Ignores unobservables Relevant contextual elements might be ignored	Conclusions are limited to the empirical observation Ignores unobservables Cannot provide strong arguments about the elements underlying statistical associations	Not all evidence is empirically measurable Explanations cannot pass strong empirical testing	Not all evidence is empirically measurable Explanations and abstractions cannot pass strong empirical testing
Type of research activity	Testing hypotheses	Finding statistical regularities	Using theories as interpretive tools	Abstracting from empirical facts to underlying mechanisms
Type of skills required to the researcher	Logical-mathematic reasoning	Statistical analysis	Creative/lateral thinking	Abstraction
Example	Rule: all beans in the sack are told to be white Hypothesis: rule is true Case: extract beans from the sack Observation A: extracted beans are white (confirm) Observation B: extracted beans are not white (falsify)	Case: extract N beans from unknown sack Observation: all extracted beans are white Rule: all beans in the sack are probably white	Rule: all beans in the sack are told to be white Observation: white beans are found near the sack Explanation: the beans have been extracted from the sack	Rule: All beans from the sack are told to be white Observation: white beans are found near the sack Explanation: the beans have been extracted from the sack Abstraction: a mechanism is “sorting” beans in that sack based on their colour

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Danermark (2019, pp. 96–135)

3.3. Qualitative case-study methodology

Vassals and peers: what kind of qualitative case-study is this

Single-N and small-N qualitative case-studies have received growing attention in social science during the last decades. Despite never being completely relegated out of the picture, for many years case-studies have survived as a minority under the dominance of large-N studies. The recent diversification in the philosophies of science has, however, given new breath to case-study methodologies. The quest to find a definition for the concept of case-study is never ending, but there is general acceptance on some key elements summarized in Gerring's definition: "*an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units*" (Gerring, 2004).

This definition sets three basic characters of case studies: a) "*intensive*", meaning that the focus of analysis is in-depth, usually with a strong integration between theory and context; b) "*single unit*", meaning that the study is *case-centric*, and focuses on bounded objects of analysis. Studies can include (and compare) more than one case, but the approach is always on the single unit as the basic level of analysis; c) "*larger*" in purpose (i.e.: general), meaning that knowledge about the case should also produce knowledge beyond the case.

Despite shared agreement on these key elements, it's still common to find misunderstandings about qualitative case-studies, their goals, their strengths, their weaknesses, and how they are to be conducted. I believe that the main source of misunderstanding comes from the diffusion of two contrasting visions about case-studies. I will call these the "vassal" and the "peer" visions, and argue for the adoption of the second, the *peer*, in the conduction of this research.

The vassal case study is the dominant interpretation in (neo)positivist philosophical traditions. The seminal work by King, Keohane, and Verba (King et al., 1994) is a fitting example. Here qualitative case studies are seen as a subordinate methodology when compared to statistical large-N studies. In this interpretation, case-studies rarely play a main role in scientific inquiry. Instead, they are usually secondary in importance and only preferred when quantitative statistical analyses are not applicable or very hard to pursue. In the best scenario, vassal case studies support large-N studies. This understanding of qualitative case studies implies their subordination to quantitative methodologies relying on large-N designs.

This tradition is rooted in the already discussed positivist epistemological dispositions (such as empiricism and constant conjunctions), which find their full expression in large-N quantitative statistical studies. In the vassal vision, case-studies need to get as close as possible to the standards adopted in such quantitative large-N studies. A classic example of this can be found in King and colleagues (King et al., 1994, p. 6):

“Since many subjects of interest to social scientists cannot be meaningfully formulated in ways that permit statistical testing of hypotheses with quantitative data, we do not wish to encourage the exclusive use of quantitative techniques. [...] we argue that nonstatistical research will produce more reliable results if researchers pay attention to the rules of scientific inference – rules that are sometimes more clearly stated in the style of quantitative research.”

This implies the adoption of a “variabilistic” or “variable-oriented” approach (Ragin, 2000). This approach can be pushed further with the adoption of algebraic syntax for the presentation of data and its elaboration. Following King and colleagues, algebraic syntax is a way to use statistical language to phrase qualitative inference, and “While qualitative researchers often use verbal models, we will use algebraic models in our discussion below to study and *improve* these verbal models.” (King et al., 1994, p. 50 emphasis added). Once again, the quote portrays rather clearly a vision where qualitative methodologies are inferior to quantitative, since the firsts can be “improved” by becoming more akin to the seconds. The main strength of this type of case study is its linearity, making for very “clean” analyses when executed properly. This is especially true when previous extensive knowledge – both theoretical and contextual – are in the hands of the researcher.

Yet, this vision also has some important weaknesses raised both within (e.g.: Ragin, 2000) and without (e.g.: Flyvbjerg, 2001) the neopositivist circle. First, in-depth case studies seldom behave as expected, especially when contextual and theoretical knowledge are not extensively developed (or agreed upon in the scientific community). Cases – especially the ones inquiring uncertain contexts and/or theories – can “speak back” to the researcher. A variable-oriented approach risks ignoring these voices. “Speaking back” here refers to the complexity of social contexts, often characterized by unexpected and irrational processes rather than linear correlations between expected variables. Second, measuring variables is not where qualitative methods shine the most. Interviews, participant observation, and other typical tools for qualitative research can collect impressive amounts of data,

but this data is subjective in nature. As the name suggests, their strength is in the richness and *quality* of the data, rather than their representativeness or *quantity*.

The (neo)positivist *vassal* view has dominated political and social sciences for a long period. However, as shown above, as positivism has been largely challenged by a more diverse pantheon of approaches, the debate has gradually shifted towards the emergence of different ideas about qualitative case-studies.

Here, the *peer* approach to case studies has emerged as a viable alternative. Most of the neo-realist alternatives (critical realism included) converge on a peer view of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Following this vision, quantitative and qualitative methodologies share a place in science independently from one another. Following Danermark (2019, p. 167) the three key components of this contemporary approach to methodology in social sciences can be summarized as: a) the quantitative/qualitative divide is no longer relevant; b) no method is “universal” and all approaches have their strengths and weaknesses depending on the area of application; c) methods can be fruitfully combined via “multimethodological approaches”.

This research adopts a *peer* understanding of the qualitative case-study methodology. Its foundational elements can be introduced from the seminal methodological axioms that Flyvbjerg from his seminal analysis the dynamics of local policymaking in Aalborg, Denmark (Flyvbjerg, 2001, 2006). Flyvbjerg’s work is perhaps the best exemplification of the shift from the vassal to the peer understanding of case studies in qualitative methodology. Starting from a presentation of five mainstream arguments used against case studies (the “*misunderstandings*”), the author argues dismantles them one by one (Table 3.5). This perspective pictures the kind of qualitative inquiry stemming from non-empiricist philosophies. Flyvbjerg arguments can be used to trace outline the type of case study my research is based on.

Table 3.5 – Flyvbjerg’s “five misunderstandings” about qualitative case-studies

	Argument against case studies	Counterargument
1	<i>“General, theoretical (context-independent) knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical (context-dependent) knowledge”</i>	<i>“Predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete, context-dependent knowledge is, therefore, more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals.”</i>
2	<i>“One cannot generalize on the basis of an individual case; therefore, the case study cannot contribute to scientific development”</i>	<i>“One can often generalize on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalization as supplement or alternative to other methods. But formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas “the force of example” is underestimated”</i>
3	<i>“The case study is most useful for generating hypotheses; that is, in the first stage of a total research process, whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building”</i>	<i>“The case study is useful for both generating and testing of hypotheses but is not limited to these research activities alone”</i>
4	<i>“The case study contains a bias toward verification, that is, a tendency to confirm the researcher’s preconceived notions”</i>	<i>“The case study contains no greater bias toward verification of the researcher’s preconceived notions than other methods of inquiry. On the contrary, experience indicates that the case study contains a greater bias toward falsification of preconceived notions than toward verification”</i>
5	<i>“It is often difficult to summarize and develop general propositions and theories on the basis of specific case studies”</i>	<i>“It is correct that summarizing case studies is often difficult, especially as concerns case process. It is less correct as regards case outcomes. The problems in summarizing case studies, however, are due more often to the properties of the reality studied than to the case study as a research method. Often it is not desirable to summarize and generalize case studies. Good studies should be read as narratives in their entirety.”</i>

Source: Author’s elaboration on quotes from Flyvbjerg (2006)

The first argument about the context dependency of knowledge can be related to the concepts of open systems and explanatory research. I understand a qualitative case study as an approach to the inquiry of objects existing in open systems, where theory is never completely separable from context. Multiple cojoined factors contribute to the causal patterns of events, highlighting multiple underlying causal mechanisms. The primary goal is thus explaining the dynamics observed within the context.

The second argument relates to the kind of “generalization” achieved by qualitative research. This work sets aside any pretence of achieving empirical generalization, focusing instead on theoretical generalization, alias *abstraction*. Abstraction is what is meant in the quote about “the force of example”.

The third argument concerns the approach to theory development and marks a exemplifies the many nuances of *peer* case study approaches. The general agreement is that qualitative research spans beyond theory testing and theory building. This work adopts the focus of critical realist analysis on *abduction* and *retroduction*, as the processes of explanation allowing for the identification of the causal patterns linking events to structures through mechanisms.

The fourth argument concerns confirmation bias. This “misunderstanding” stems from a view mistrusting qualitative inquiry as subjective and arbitrary, against the more objective and rational quantitative analyses. The first part of the counterargument is that such pretence of objectivity is ill-posed, since quantitative-variabilistic analyses have the same risk of confirmation bias as other methodologies. For example, variabilistic research designs are always relying on assumptions which could have important implications on the results, especially if taken uncritically (see also Ragin, 2000). In the second half of Flyvbjerg’s counterargument the author states that “the case study has its own rigor, different to be sure, but no less strict than the rigor of quantitative methods” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 235). Such rigour is to be found in the qualitative researcher’s *critical reflexivity*, that is the constant struggle to establish a dialogue between theory and empirical experience:

“The idea is to observe oneself critically and discover whether the abstractions and generalizations one has made are valid. [...] even though sense data are the primary source of knowledge, it is by reasoning that we attain a deeper insight into reality – through introspection. [...] One can achieve this by letting doubt occupy the seat of honour” (Danermark et al., 2019, p. 175)

Critical reflexivity is thus a valid and established practice to prevent confirmation bias, especially when it stays constant throughout all the phases of research conduction. It also forms the frame in which qualitative hypotheses are formulated and tried in much qualitative research, including the present one.

The fifth and last argument is related to the way of presenting evidence and structuring the arguments. As discussed above, quantitative-oriented views of qualitative inquiry have tried to simplify language to the point of adopting logical-algebraic syntax as an “improvement” over verbal narratives (King et al., 1994). However, what exactly makes for such an improvement seems to be implicit in the argument of King and colleagues. Following the same example employed by the authors (p. 54) it’s unclear what makes the term “average” qualitatively worse than

its algebraic expression “ $A = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n a_i$ ”. Provided that the two syntaxes have the same logical meaning, arguing that the algebraic form is better for the construction of qualitative arguments seems far-fetched.

Flyvbjerg’s counterargument takes the opposite direction, rejecting the rationale for the simplification argument at its core. His first criticism is related to *what* is being summarized. Results and outcomes of case studies can, in fact, be summarized just as well as other types of study. Tables and figures are widespread in qualitative research and serve this purpose in an excellent way. Conversely, the presentation of a qualitative argument is a different matter. Agreed, simplification is not the best thing a qualitative case study can do. But for most qualitative studies that is not the point. The focus is the opposite: *depth*. In other words, case studies excel when they adopt a holist approach, rather than a reductionist: the interest is in understanding the whole, rather than selecting some of its parts (Thomas, 2015). This is typically achieved through extensive narratives and detailed causal stories. In research practice, this translates to the recognition of the explanatory power of storytelling in the presentation of arguments, by means of a contextually rich description of the events unfolding. It’s about “emphasizing little things” and putting clarification over simplification (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 133). A good narrative – a strong causal story – does not need simplification, nor benefits from it.

The picture of the *peer* view of qualitative case study described above is the one that will be used in this research. In-depth, explanatory, context-dependent, reflexive, and narrative.

The comparative strategy

An important methodological element to discuss at this point is *comparison*. Since this research is analysing two cases, the comparative dimension requires discussion. The intrinsic goal of having more than one case in qualitative research is, in fact, to complement knowledge *within* cases with knowledge *across* cases.

Again, *comparing* can assume different meanings based on methodological approaches. Following the inspiring work of Vavrus and Bartlett (2023), two approaches to comparison mirror the two approaches to case study I presented above: *variance* and *processual*. The variance approach is the most common in post-positivist interpretations of the comparative methodology. Such approach is rooted in Mill’s philosophy of science, which has been developed into the classic *most similar system design* (MSSD) and *most different system design* (MDSD), and

then the latest and more refined *qualitative comparative analysis* (QCA) (Mill, 1950; Przeworski & Teune, 1970; Ragin, 2000). The processual orientation, coherent with peer case studies, aims to “trace across” the cases, looking for the interconnection of actors, events, scales and processes both within and between the cases (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2023).

A persistent misconception in political studies is the assumption that no other forms of comparison exist besides the variance approach of MSSD, MDSD, and QCA. Indeed, alternative approaches to comparison have been developed. Especially hybrid applications of policy studies – at the intersection of urban studies, regional studies, social policy, education, and others – have generated a variety of examples (see J. Robinson, 2016; Hart, 2018; Leitner & Sheppard, 2020; Krehl & Weck, 2020).

At the base of their distinction is the goal of comparison. Variance oriented comparisons – like MSSD, MDSD, and QCA – are stronger in identifying deterministic causal regularities between the configuration of differences and similarities found in cases. The goal is identifying empirical generalizations and it’s very important to identify, fix, and isolate the specific factors of interest since research design.

Process comparisons are stronger in explaining non-deterministic causal processes where complex multi-mechanism causal chains are to be expected. At the design stage, information is imperfect. The initial configuration of similarities and differences is *provisional* and can be expanded, updated, or revised during empirical research. Here, the goal is to *discover* further similarities and differences between cases and use them to support the construction of convincing explanatory narratives. There is no intent at empirical generalization, but abstract generalization is possible.

The two can be used complementarily but answer different types of questions. I believe it’s important to reiterate their distinction to avoid misunderstandings. For example, a processual comparison on two cases can uncover multiple key dynamics of an unknown and complex policy process. These can then be individually isolated and put through a variance-based comparison alongside additional cases, in search for regularities. Conversely, a variance comparison can identify a specific regularity between cases first, and a processual comparison can then inquire the validity of the claim against a deeper contextual analysis of few cases.

Trying to give processual comparison a more systematic protocol, Vavrus and Bartlett (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2023) identify the three axes of processual comparison. These are the *vertical*, *horizontal* and *transversal*. The horizontal axis compares how similar policies unfold in distinct locations. It focuses on the policy from a close distance and inquires mostly the facts happening in different contexts, but at the same scale. The vertical axis adds the element of scale to the picture, by inquiring how the same policy is interpreted and re-interpreted at different geographical scales, either officially or unofficially. Finally, the transversal axis “historically situates” the policies within the longer period dynamics that characterize the specific context. It aims at framing the policy process in the longer period contextual elements that are relevant to understanding how certain events came to be and why.

Table 3.6 – three axes of processual comparisons

Axis of comparison	Example
Horizontal	Looking for similarities and differences in how the same policy is implemented in distinct locations at the same scale
Vertical	Inquiring how vertical dynamics influence the implementation of the same policy in distinct cases
Transversal	Understanding the influence of historical patterns/legacies on the implementation of the same policy in distinct cases.

Source: author’s elaboration on Vavrus and Bartlett (2023)

The design of the case study

This section presents the research design, intended as the blueprint for the conduction of the study. The aim of this paragraph is to provide a description of how the case study methodology presented above is translated into research practice.

I have discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 that this work moves from the idea to inquire how the green transition goals of a European investment programme (NGEU) are being integrated locally. I have also discussed that, from the general point of view of policy theory, this issue sits within a literature gap about implementation problems in policy integration literature.

Designing such a study proved to be particularly complex as, despite their relevance, both the object of study and the theory are quite elusive and characterized by a lack of a solid, established knowledge foundation to build upon. Facing this task, my choice has been to design the study around two core traits, *explorativeness* and *emergence*.

The former, explorativeness, is a common attribute of case studies about phenomena lacking established knowledge. In exploratory designs the aim is to approach the topic from an open-ended perspective, generating new hypotheses as the research progresses in iteration between theory and empirical materials (see Thomas, 2015). Consequently, my inquiry relies strongly on a logic of discovery, in which the explanation of empirically observed processes is used to refine existing knowledge and discover unexpected theoretical perspectives.

The latter trait, emergence, is closely related to the former. Already conceptualized by Patton (2002), and later elaborated by Vavrus and Bartlett (2023), an “emergent design” is one “in which the scholar gradually modifies and refines the design over the course of the study in relation to what they are learning” (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2023, pp. 6–7). It must be said that, although named with different labels, a degree of emergence is common to much qualitative social research. For example, quoting Wagenaar (2014, p. 250) “it is the dirty little secret of experienced researchers that you only know what your research question is *after* you have done the research”. In practical terms, emergence corresponds to an incremental approach in the way research proceeds operationally. Starting from a broader, open-ended perspective, my research is then incrementally focused and fine-tuned on the relevant aspects that “emerge” during the process of data collection. It’s a dynamic process in which data collection and theoretical propositions are constantly updated in relation to one another.

Understanding these two core traits is central to introduce the topic of cases selection. These are, respectively, the municipalities of Genoa and Lisbon. Consistent with the need to understand phenomena in a condition of imperfect information, the selection of the two cases has been dictated by two sampling principles. Namely, their relevance to the phenomenon inquired, and their learning potential.

About their relevance, both territories characterize as strong cases for the observation of NGEU implementation dynamics at the local level. The rationale is simple: if I want to observe the dynamics characterizing a programme for territorial investment, I want to look where investments are substantial. Referring to the typology found in Thomas (2015) these are *key cases*, as they are representative examples of the phenomenon under inquiry. Both the territories of Genoa and Lisbon have been interested by the allocation of large shares of NGEU funds (in the order of billions of euros). This leads to the assumption that such cases represent a good setting to observe the implementation of territorial investments. Since much

of the investments must comply with environmental conditions, we can also assume that these cases offer a key opportunity to capture if and how processes of integration have taken place.

About their learning potential, Genoa and Lisbon are *information-rich* cases. This links to the strategies of “purposeful sampling” presented in Patton’s work, as the strategic choice of selecting cases with a focus on learning (Stake, 1995; Patton, 2002). Here, learning potential should be understood as the chance to illuminate diverse aspects of the processes under study, prioritizing depth of understanding and contextual richness. The choice of Genoa and Lisbon matches this condition, as the two cases offer a rich array of contextual similarities and differences that can contribute to the inquiry. Quoting a few, similarities include the “Napoleonic” administrative tradition of Southern Europe, population size, geographic placement along the coast, environmental risks (e.g.: floods, urban heat islands, noise, congestion, etc.). Conversely, differences include economic development with a mono-economy in Genoa based on sea trade, against a dynamic third-sector economy in Lisbon driven by tourism, finance, real estate, and more. Importance in the national panorama (as well as proximity to the central government), with Genoa being a peripheral, regional centre, while Lisbon being the State Capital and main urban centre. Also, there are important difference in the polity, with Portugal lacking Regions and Metropolitan areas as an intermediate level of administration in contrast to Italy.¹⁰

It is evident that these contextual similarities and differences may shape local NGEU implementation in multiple ways, triggering various mechanisms that are not fully predictable at the outset of the research. Given the exploratory nature of the study, it is not possible to establish in advance which specific factors will prove most consequential. Rather than treating this uncertainty as a limitation, the research design leverages on this contextual richness. The diversity of contextual conditions present in Genoa and Lisbon creates favourable conditions for the development of rich, detailed causal narratives. The idea is to allow the specific configurations of relevant factors to emerge during fieldwork. In this sense, the abundance of potentially relevant contextual elements enhances the learning potential of the cases, making Genoa and Lisbon particularly well suited to an exploratory and emergent research design.

¹⁰ While intermediate territorial entities exist in Portugal (Regions and Metropolitan Cities) these are respectively extensions of the national or the municipal governments. They lack the constitutional recognition, administrative structure, and autonomy of the Italian counterparts.

About the units of analysis, the inquiry follows a funnel structure, moving from a broad overview of NGEU expenditures to an in-depth focus on specific actors at the municipal level. At the initial stage, expenditure databases are used to develop a bird's-eye view of how NGEU resources are allocated across policy areas and organizations. This macro-level perspective serves an orienting function, helping to identify patterns and concentrations of resources, paving the way for the subsequent phase of qualitative interviews. At the same time, the analysis of the databases also allows the emergence of further contextual patterns that might be relevant for the interpretation of the data at a later stage of research. The core units of analysis, however, are municipal administrations. After the initial macro-oriented perspective, the inquiry moves to the micro-level, setting the attention on the processes of implementation within municipal policymaking. This stage relies on the collection of data through qualitative interviews, targeting key informants with substantial expertise in local NGEU investments and environmental action.

The comparative dimension of this study follows a processual approach as already introduced above. Comparison is thus used as an analytical tool to trace how similar policy programmes unfold in different contexts. In this sense, comparison serves to complement the in-depth within-case analysis with cross-case insights. Empirically, the study moves along the three axes of processual comparison presented in Table 3.6. Horizontally, the study examines how NGEU environmental integration develops in two distinct municipal contexts, allowing similarities and differences in the implementation processes to emerge through the engagement with the cases. Vertically, the research analyses municipal implementation within the broader multilevel governance framework of NGEU, tracing how structural constraints originating at higher institutional levels are translated or reconfigured locally. Transversally, the inquiry historically situates observed implementation dynamics within longer-term institutional, economic, and political trajectories specific to each case.

Concluding the discussion of the research design, we can put forward a series of preliminary expectations. An emergent research design, in fact, does not imply a complete lack of priors. While theoretical perspectives on policy integration remain underdeveloped with respect to the implementation gap, existing literature nonetheless provides a basis for articulating a tentative set of hypotheses. Drawing on the available knowledge, the analysis is guided by two theoretically informed alternative scenarios concerning how environmental integration may (or may not) unfold in practice. These hypotheses offer a heuristic framework for engaging with

the empirical material, working as a basic framework for inquiry while preserving openness to unanticipated dynamics.

The first scenario hypothesizes a pattern of linear implementation, in which local actors maximise compliance with the top-down mandate to integrate territorial investments with green transition goals. Under this scenario, policy integration would be expected to manifest in observable forms. To engage with this empirically, the analysis draws on the distinction between substantive and procedural integration discussed in Chapter 2. Substantive integration would be reflected in documentary evidence, such as the formulation of new policy instruments, or the adaptation of existing ones, explicitly linking NGEU expenditures to environmental or climate-related objectives. Procedural integration would be indicated by the presence of formal or informal coordination practices, including arrangements aimed at integrating environmental actors in the design and implementation of NGEU investments. Following this evidence, the research would focus its explanatory effort in identifying the emergent mechanisms that foster policy integration. In line with the existing literature, particular attention would be paid to the interaction between the contextual conditions and the policy capacities mobilized during implementation, and how their configuration contributes to support integration.

The second scenario, conversely, hypothesizes a pattern of non-linear implementation, in which local actors deviate from the top-down mandate of environmental integration resulting in limited compliance with EU green transition goals. Under this scenario, empirical evidence would reveal weak substantive and procedural integration, and a consequent tendency towards fragmentation and the reproduction of the status quo. The explanatory analysis, in this case, would focus on the identification of the emergent mechanisms discouraging policy integration. Drawing from the implementation literature discussed at the end of Chapter 2, a specific attention would be put on actors' priorities and interests, evidence of inter-sectoral competition, encounter of joint-action problems, persistence of policy legacies, defensive bureaucratic postures, and resistance to change.

In Chapter 4, these two scenarios will be probed and refined incrementally, based on the empirical data collected. Accounting for the condition of imperfect information that characterizes the research design, the inquiry will “navigate the grey areas” between the two opposite expectations through iterative, critical engagement with theory and empirical observation.

3.4. Materials and methods

Interviews: what type

Interviews are the main method for data collection in this dissertation. It is, in fact through interviews that I gathered the bulk of the empirical material for the analysis. But which kind of interviews did I use? And how did I conduct them? Answering these questions is not trivial. Despite being generally understood as a type of method, “interviews” come in many forms at the opposite sides of the methodological debate (Briggs, 1986; Wengraf, 2001; Corbetta, 2003; J. Rubin & S. Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2019). A whole spectrum develops between those who treat interviews close to questionnaires with highly standardized protocols, and those who adopt unstructured conversational approaches. Following the seminal work of Corbetta (2003) as a guideline, I characterize my interviews as: *qualitative*, aimed at *comprehension*, *case-centred*, and *non-standardized*.

To start, *qualitative* means that the value (and validity) of the data collected depends on the meaningfulness of the content rather than the representativeness of the sample. Qualitative interviewing it’s about gathering in-depth attentive accounts and then “putting meaning in context” (Seidman, 2019, p. 19). It’s the equivalent of like asking a few habitual customers of a restaurant to tell me if the place has good food, why, and which dishes they recommend. Meaning is important because is the only way to stimulate an “act of attention” (see Schutz, 1967, quoted in Seidman, 2019) from the responder. This is what people mean colloquially when they say something is *meaningful* as a synonym of *relevant*, *significant*. But meaning is not worthy by itself, it must be put in context. Who is this person? Why would they tell me this? How are they involved in the issue? What are their interests? Would they benefit from lying to me? These reflective questions put the meaning in context. Whereas quantitative interviewing (e.g.: surveys) focus on *how many* people have said something, qualitative interviews are based on *what* has been said, by whom and in which conditions.

About the goals (i.e.: the objectives of data collection) the type interviews I adopt is aimed to achieve *comprehension* rather than justification (Corbetta, 2003). Where justification is the logic commonly adopted to test hypotheses, comprehension aims to understand and explain events. This is the main difference between survey-style interviews and in-depth interviews. The goal of a survey is to extract objective information from the respondents, and interviews of this type assume complete intelligibility between the interviewer’s question and

interviewee's response. Qualitative interviews, on the other hand, have the main goal of collecting *stories* and *narratives*, specifically from the point of view of the interviewee: "I interview because I am interested in other people's stories. Most simply put, stories are a way of knowing" (Seidman, 2019, p. 7).

Interviews in this work are thus *case-centred*, meaning that from the collection of individual narratives, they mean to extract the necessary elements to understand a series of events. Interviews "reconstruct events that the researchers never experienced" (J.Rubin & S.Rubin, 2005, p. 3). In other words, each story collected with an interview is a subjective narrative of specific events. The role of the researcher is to collect such narratives and put them together, with the goal of reconstructing a broader, coherent causal story of the course of events taking place. Since we've established that it's epistemologically impossible to directly observe much of social reality, this means that it's also impossible to achieve a perfectly objective reconstruction of a course of events. All data is filtered by both the interviewee and interviewer's experience. Nonetheless, triangulating different stories between them (and even better with other secondary sources of data) it's possible to reach accurate descriptions and understandings of causal patterns. What researchers can do is use this empirical data to provide the best reconstruction of events possible against any other competing explanations (i.e.: *abduction*).

Lastly, interviews are *non-standardized*. As an interviewer, one of the most difficult tasks is to allow the interviewee to tell his version of the story, while at the same time retaining the "steering wheel" of the conversation. Balancing these two opposing forces is perhaps the most "creative" part of the interview where social and conversational skills come strongly into play. Differently from surveys, qualitative interviews are usually semi-structured or un-structured. This specifically responds to the need of following one's own research goals, without interfering with the respondent's train of thought. A structured questionnaire, for example, would achieve highly standardized responses, but would lose most of the depth and meaningfulness. On the other hand, a completely un-structured interview, would risk shifting out of topic, with the interviewer at the mercy of the interviewee. This is perhaps the reason why the most common type of qualitative interview is the *semi-structured*. In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer prepares a guide to follow but leaves great liberty in the interviewee discussion and formulation of the arguments, intervening only when necessary (for example when the respondent is going out of topic, when more precise information is needed, etc.):

“In the qualitative interview, by contrast, notwithstanding the interviewer’s task of establishing the topics of conversation, *the dominant voice is that of the respondent*. In the extreme case (and in some respects the ideal case), the interviewer will speak very little; he will merely prompt and encourage the respondent, who will be totally free to express his thoughts, motivations and points of view as he wishes” (Corbetta, 2003, p. 266, emphasis in the original).

This makes it such that every interview is different in the way the conversation develops. Thus, the interview guide plays a flexible role in shaping the conversation around the key topics.

Interviewing: asking who about what

In my interviews I have focused on involving *experts*, as people with specific and in-depth knowledge over the topic of NGEU funded investments implementation, local environmental policies, or both. Specifically, the experts I interviewed have two profiles of expertise: *bureaucrats* (e.g.: public administrators) and *specialists* (e.g.: analysts, scholars, advisors, etc.), or hybrid (Appendix 2). The main difference in these profiles is the type of expertise they have. Direct expertise in the case of bureaucrats and indirect for specialists. This means that bureaucrats have a closer point of observation of policymaking, as well as a first-hand involvement in its dynamics and development over time. Specialists, on the other hand, are further away from policymaking, but can offer detailed and analytical insights. Their lack of first-person accounts is compensated by their capacity to reflect critically and think about the “big picture”.

For both contexts I have interviewed a panel of experts including both types of expertise. The specific mix has been influenced by my access to the cases and the recruitment strategy I have followed. In both contexts, I adopted a “snowball” recruitment strategy, meaning I started from a small sample of contacts, and proceeded with an incremental collection of contacts from the interviewees themselves. Both spontaneous or prompted suggestions were given to me during the interviews, or during follow-up conversations.

Regarding access to the field, in the case of Genoa I benefited from direct access to the municipal administration from within. As part of my scholarship, in fact, I had the chance to contact and collaborate with one of the municipality’s managers, which guided me and facilitated access to further contacts. This made it easier for me to contact bureaucrats since the beginning, as I was introduced by one

of their colleagues. In the case of Lisbon, on the other hand, my access followed a more “academic” path, as I gained access to the case thanks to the 6 moths I spent at the University of Lisbon as visiting researcher. It must be added that, in this context, language influenced access in a relevant way, as my Portuguese is not fluent enough to enjoy (nor conduct) a technical conversation. For these reasons, it has proven more sensible to access the field from a core of English-speaking specialists. These contacts I reached thanks to faculty members in my home university (Portuguese specialists with whom they had collaborated), and further connections I established during my stay in Lisbon. Only after this first round, I managed to establish contacts with English-speaking bureaucratic profiles. Overall, despite the difference in accessing the two fields, I managed to collect a balanced samples including interviewees of both types in the two cases.

Given the strategy I followed, I have been aware and attentive to the risk of biased selection from the start of the interviews. In fact, given the critical role of my initial contacts I had to be careful avoiding the selection of “friendly” contacts supporting a one-sided narrative. I am confident in the avoidance of this risk based on three strategies I adopted: first, I didn’t put full and blind trust on the contact’s suggestions. Instead, I engaged in constructive discussion to gradually build a list of contacts based on the needs of my research. Second, to confirm the quality of recruitment I put attention to the diversity of points of view and narratives in the answers I collected during interviews. Finding such diversity confirmed I was on the right track. Third, I used such diversity to guide the “snowballing”, collecting suggestions from interviewees with relevant differences in points of view.

About the interview guide, given this distinction in profiles, I have developed it in two versions, based on the type of expertise (appendix 1). The basic structure is the same in both versions and revolves around three main blocks, although with variation in the structure of the conversation: professional history, main activity, and future scenarios.

The first block contains questions about the professional history of the interviewee, to trace clear boundaries of their type and field of expertise. Some basic information about these were available beforehand, but it’s still relevant to confirm them. Given the snowball technique, it’s always possible that the contact suggestion is misguided or imprecise. Duties, roles, and expertise can change over time, so I consider good practice to double check all suggestions with an online search before the interview, and an initial section of presentation during the conversation.

It's not rare to find out interesting details during this phase of the interview. As I found out, it's common to find unpredicted (but relevant) areas of expertise, other roles the person plays or has played in the past, and so on. During this phase of interview, the line between the bureaucrat and expert profile can become more marked, or blurred, so modifications can be done to the interview guide on the spot. Such occasions are not rare and, with different degrees, remind that bureaucrats can "wear the specialist hat", and vice versa. People are not the administrative labels they are attached to. In cases like these, picking some targeted questions from the other version of the interview guide can be qualitatively worthy, and give additional depth and meaning to the data.

The second block is dedicated to the main activities being conducted in relation to NGEU investments implementation, environmental policy, or both. In the case of bureaucrats these will be direct questions pointed at the interviewee's actions and their first-hand account of policy implementation. This involved more emphasis on telling examples and first-person stories. I found such types of prompts particularly effective to help interviewees clarify their meaning of abstract concepts. At the same time, examples are useful for me to bypass technical jargon, as well as adding character to the narrative. In the case of specialists, examples still played a role, but the structure of the interviews has relied more on stimulating critical reflexivity about the bigger picture. This provides a more "analytic" account of the events they are familiar with.

In both cases, this section of the interview is highly conversational and discursive. The interview guide, thus, played a supporting role for prompts and steering. Questions have not been following a specific order for all interviews, and the flow of each conversation was defined by the interaction itself. As with the previous section, hybridization between the two versions of the guide is possible, depending on the profile of the interviewee emerging during the conversation.

The third and final block is dedicated to future scenarios. These questions are specifically placed at the end of the interview, to ensure the necessary trust has been built in the conversation, allowing the interviewee to speak as freely as possible. Here, metaphorical thinking and scenario-making have a central role such as "what would you change, if you had the magic wand" or "the sceptre of command". For both bureaucrats and specialists, then, I asked to imagine two scenarios (one positive and one negative) 5 years in the future. Questions like these have the aim to overcome the rigidities of the interviewees' routines and implicit rationales (bureaucratic especially) and try to think "outside the box". Also, these questions

are particularly effective to discover the interviewee personal position in relation to a “positive” and “negative” outcome of the policy. This information is essential to further understand and contextualize their previous statements.

Secondary sources: documents, books, and databases

While interviews represent the main source of data in the research, other sources of information have been used as support. The role of these “secondary” sources is to increase the strength, validity and relevance of the contents of the interviews. This happens in many ways, mainly by *triangulating* the different sources to achieve a diversity of goals: *preparation*, *contextualization*, *corroboration* or *challenging*, and *nuancing*.

Preparation is when the material is used to pave the way for interviews. For example, the analysis of quantitative expenditure databases has been a fundamental preparatory phase to focus patterns of local spending. *Contextualization* is when additional material is needed to make sense of the information from other sources. For example, readings about the Portuguese political system have been fundamental in order to understand passages of the interviews in Lisbon. *Corroboration* or *challenging* are the actions to check if the facts stated in interviews are confirmed or dismissed by other sources of data. For example, interviewees’ references to monetary sums, projects, dates of events can be corroborated or challenged through triangulation with official administrative documents and databases. *Nuancing* is when different sources are used to make small adjustments in the interpretation of interview contents. For example, when “inflated” narratives of events given by interviewees are weighted using external sources.

The guiding principle of my approach to secondary sources comes from one of the lectures of political historian Professor Sarah Paine:

“Read more broadly than whatever your topic is. Because in the unknown it’s what you’re after. What are the things that are truly important, and you have no idea about? [...] you bump into things and «woah, that turns out to be important».”¹¹

Ironically, the podcast of her lecture is something I bumped into during a break from work while I was conducting my interviews in Lisbon. Although impossible to give a complete detailed list of the materials I bumped into, including the ones

¹¹ Full lecture retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbkO84MsmYM> (quote timestamp 1:12:03)

that turned out to be irrelevant, below are listed the main secondary sources of undoubted importance.

First, are the Italian and Portuguese National Recovery and Resilience Plans. Although quite rhetoric in their style, the contents of the plans are crucial in framing territorial investment in the overall national context as well as understanding the spending rationales and official narratives.

Second, are the certified databases of NGEU expenditure based on official data. These are composed of the raw data on expenditure, disaggregated per project ID, type of investment, thematic category, implementing body, and territorial scale up to the municipal level. These have been retrieved online and downloaded in their version updated to May 2025. For the Italian case, the data comes from the OPEN PNRR platform, the public repository managed by Openpolis Foundation and the Gran Sasso Science Institute.¹² For the Portuguese case, the data comes from the official open-data repository of the Portuguese Public Administration.¹³

Third, are the territorial climate and environmental plans relevant to both cases. Greatest importance has been given to municipal plans. These include the Action Plans for mitigation and adaptation in the scope of the EU Covenant of Mayors initiative in both territories. In Genoa, the other main source is the “Genoa 2050 Lighthouse Strategy” action plan and the Metropolitan Plan for Sustainable Mobility. action plan. In Lisbon, the PAC Lisboa 2030 and Climate City Contract.

Fourth, are a series of specialized books, specifically offering me elements for broad contextualization. For Genoa, the main readings have been the volumes from Gazzola (2021) and Lami (Lami, 2007). With these I aimed at understanding the political economy of the territory, in search for elements to ground the analysis of NGEU investments. For Lisbon, I had to substantially expand my effort, as I did not only lack foundations about the local political economic structure, but also about cultural and institutional references. The collection of essays from the Francisco Manuel Dos Santos Foundation proved to be a gold mine to find knowledge anchor points. These gave me foundational knowledge about the Portuguese party system (Jalali, 2017), public administration (Tavares, 2019), local democratic institutions (Oliveira, 2021), and national economy (Amaral, 2022; Bué Alves, 2022). Seixas (2021) offered me insights about Lisbon’s recent history of economic development. Finally, Pincha (2024) and Henriques (2024) offered

¹² <https://openpnrr.it/>

¹³ <https://dados.gov.pt/>

snippets about Lisbon's and Portugal's culture and history. Far from making me an expert, these books gave me a great deal of help in understanding cultural references from my interviewees, as well as constructing trust with them.

Analysis: think, write, rinse, repeat

In October 2024 I had just arrived in Lisbon to begin my interviews on the second case. Having concluded the interviews for the first case, Genoa, I decided it was a good time to start *coding*. Much to my despair, the more I coded, the less my data made sense. I was breaking apart my interviews, identifying themes, giving them labels, merging codes, splitting codes, all of it. I was trying to follow what I learnt during courses and read on conventional manuals (e.g.: Yin, 2017). But as much as those procedures made sense on paper, I felt like a toddler trying to fit a square toy in a triangular hole.

At that point in my research, I had not yet completely realized the implications of important things emerging from my study. For example, that policy integration *didn't* happen in my cases, and this meant I was trying to explain *why something didn't happen*. Also, it turned out later that a big explanatory element of local NGEU spending was in *institutional* dynamics (like path dependence). But institutions hide in the dark spots of interviews, as they often act without interviewees acknowledging they do. How could I code, if the things that really mattered were the ones *missing* from the interviews?

It wasn't still clear to me that I was committing the mistake of putting the brunt of *analysis* on *coding*. And on a very specific understanding of coding that did not fit well to the evidence in my hands. One that goes with the assumption that the things that are more frequently said, are also the ones that matter the most. There, disassembling, sorting, and reassembling textual data is the way to find patterns in meaning. But that was not my case. Despite the initial panic, I kept confidence in the value of my work and that, eventually, I would have found a way to systematize it. So, I trusted my gut and put coding to the side for the time being.

As per many other methodological issues discussed in this chapter, my doctoral path brought me to realize that data analysis is not uncontested. Conventional coding-oriented approach based on sorting and disassembling data (Yin, 2009, 2017) are challenged by eclectic post-coding approaches based on reflective and interpretive inquiry (MacLure, 2013; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014; A. Y. Jackson & Mazzei, 2022). Both perspectives have their strength and weaknesses (Coffey &

Atkinson, 1996, pp. 11–16). The former has the benefit of being systematic, easy to reproduce, and to teach. However, it comes with a risk of proceduralism, especially when coding is applied acritically and misconceived as a synonym for analysis (as I did at first). The latter has the benefit of advancing creative and adaptive analyses that focus more on the interpretation than the procedure. However, the absence of guidelines can make the conduction of such analyses obscure, cryptic, at times esoteric.

What I needed was an intermediate and complementary perspective. A middle-ground, realist kind of analysis. A way to approach my data systematically, without fear of leaning on more reflective interpretations to understand the *unobservables*. A way to solve the internal conflict of many qualitative researchers, as “the quantitative side of me looked for the emergence of meaning from the repetition of phenomena. The qualitative side of me looked for the emergence of meaning in the single instance” (Stake, 1995, p. 76).

The eventual analytical approach I adopted is the result of a very pragmatic process of *learning by doing*, anchored to relevant references in the literature on middle-ground positions to qualitative analysis. Overall, my approach consists of three iterative components: *direct interpretation*, *focused coding* and *writing*. I choose to speak of “iterative” components instead of “subsequent phases”, to underline the character of non-linearity of this kind of analysis (Stake, 1995; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Merriam, 2009; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). The idea is that qualitative research is seldom characterized by a watertight distinction between data collection, data analysis, and writing. Instead, these are in continuous interaction and reciprocal influence.

Direct interpretation, as described in Stake (1995) is the strategy for qualitative analysis that relies on treating data as bits of a whole, instead of an aggregate of categories. Its goal is to reach a general idea of what’s important in the “big picture” and generate most-likely explanations of the case (i.e.: *abductive* propositions).

Many reasons make this approach suitable to my research. Stake (1995) identifies this process as best-suited to case-centric research where finding original explanations of complex processes is crucial, as opposed to theory-driven research where categorical aggregation (i.e.: conventional coding) is more appropriate. It is also a process suitable for discursive, less standardized styles of interviews – opposed to questionnaires that are easily codable – and when the volume of data allows to be managed by hand. How much is too much is a matter of subjectivity,

but managing thirty one-hour interviews is surely more feasible than managing a hundred two-hour interviews.

Direct interpretation does not have prescribed starting or ending points. Operationally, the activity is characterized by an intense reflective effort on the empirical material, that happens already during the data collection. It's the engaging process that drives an *emergent* research design (see the research design paragraph above). In practice, for example this means to formulate provisional interpretations from promising comments in individual interviews. Then probing these interpretations in the following encounters, or against previous transcripts. Making small adjustments to the interview guides on-the-go. Going back to the theoretical literature and looking for further evidence on that particular aspect. Updating the research questions, if necessary. Although not the only type of analysis, direct interpretation is the main scaffolding of my analytic effort, to which the others (focused coding and writing) are anchored.

The fact that direct interpretation is characterized by creative and reflective engagement with interview transcripts is not conducive to a lack of systematicity. *Discipline* is central to any analysis effort in the form of rigor and care (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). This discipline is operationalized in many ways. First, by repeatedly reading and re-reading interview transcripts and notes, as well as listening to recordings to identify those details (accents, tones, inflexes, etc.) that cannot transpire on paper. The outcome of this process is achieving a deep *familiarity* with the individual interviews, to the point of holding a precise recollection of what has been said by whom, and in which section of the interview. Second, triangulating interview data with both theory and secondary sources. Third, by engaging in intensive sessions of pen-and-paper annotations, in the form of schemes and/or writings. In an iterative process going back-and-forth through these operations, I was able to put together and formulate tentative hypothetical explanations to be probed, revised, or discarded.

As this iterative process of direct interpretation was going, the analysis also started to get increasingly focused. Data started to "make sense". At one point in time, I realized I was fairly confident of having identified five emergent dynamics that were central to both of my cases. These were: 1) NGEU implementation was strongly fragmented; 2) the allocation of investments was related to important local things that happened in the past; 3) minimum effort was put on complying with EU green conditions; 4) money was not just a tool for policy but also a political asset; 5) there was weak interest in cooperating between offices. Intuitively, I also

understood that direct interpretation had reached a saturation point, since no other element was “boiling” to the surface with such force.

Now that I had these five central “themes”, it was clear that they represented the tip of the iceberg (see Figure 3.1), the empirical evidence of underlying processes, of which I collected scattered instances from partial and subjective accounts. How do these processes develop? Do they relate to one another? Are they connected? Do they depend on one another? In which order?

I could now bring back *coding*, although of a different kind that I call *focused coding* – borrowing the expression (with some differences) from the work of Timmermans and Tavory (2022). Focused coding is the action I used to purposely put the hypothetical explanations of the case under trial. This is achieved by means of: identifying the passages of interviews that relate to the five themes; linking the themes to specific events; triangulate them with secondary sources; and understand what’s their place and importance in the overall narrative of the policy process under study. The goal is to compose a thick, detailed recollection of the cases starting from the few specific themes I identified (Merriam, 2009). Focused coding starts from direct interpretation and feeds new refined evidence into further interpretation rounds. The idea is to compose the causal dynamics and describe the emergent patterns in the form of mechanisms.

Writing is the final component of this paragraph, because I share the belief (and experience) that writing is an act of qualitative analysis proper (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Specifically, writing is the ultimate analytical effort sewing together the pieces of the research in a coherent narrative. I approach writing as more than “presenting” or “reporting” results ex-post. Writing has a way of putting interpretations to the test, by forcing me to put abstract thoughts and schematic ideas into words. Devil is in the details, and writing does pull all the devils out of hell. Not all things that make sense in a scheme, an annotation, or in a codebook, also make sense in a narrative. Indeed, there is much back-and-forth between *thinking with* the empirical material and *writing about* it.

“When the money’s coming your way, you don’t ask questions”

- Frank Underwood, House of Cards, Chapter 20

Chapter 4

Recovery and Resilience in Genoa and Lisbon

This chapter presents and discusses the results of the empirical analysis on the cases of Genoa and Lisbon. It presents a detailed account of the implementation of NGEU projects in both cities, aiming to understand if, and how, the territorial investments have been coupled with environmental action.

The chapter adopts a narrative style, following the incremental evolution of the research itself. As discussed in the research design paragraph, this study is characterized by emergence and, coherently with many orientations of qualitative social research, consists in a process of constant transformation and reform through the research itself. I have thus structured this Chapter engaging with the turns and adaptations occurring during the process of research development.

In the first paragraph I “follow the money” presenting the first phase of the empirical research, before starting the interviews. This phase is characterized by the inquiry of NGEU spending databases, in order to understand what the money had been spent on and by whom. In the overall picture, this part of the research has contributed to focus the inquiry on municipalities and guide the next phase of the research. The second paragraph is dedicated to reconstructing *why* municipal administrations decided to focus their investments on specific topics, uncovering a common path-dependent pattern of expenditure in each case, although with interesting variations: a case of *self-reinforcing* and one of *reactive* path dependence. With this knowledge established, in the third paragraph I engage the research questions upfront. In the first part I argue that NGEU proved scarcely effective in fostering phenomena of policy integration. Here, I present how the

evidence converges on the lack of integration between sectors entrusted with the NGEU resources and those acting on environmental policy. The second part engages in reconstructing a causal explanation about why this happened. Here I present three micro-level mechanisms emerging from the empirical analysis that operate in both local contexts: tokenism, budgeting, and displacement. These mechanisms trace a causal connection between key institutional elements and the behaviour of municipal actors that result in the overall lack of policy integration. In the fourth and final paragraph I engage in tracing the links between the empirical and theoretical chapters. Doing so, I discuss whether and how a series of theoretical statements are supported or challenged by the empirical material, contributing to nuance, update, and generate new propositions. Alongside the theoretical reflections, the chapter also includes pragmatic reflections, wishing to foster the extrapolation of useful insights for policymakers.

4.1. Following the money

Following the mainstream classification of policy tools we recalled in the first chapter, NGEU is primarily an economic instrument for green growth. In other words, the program aims to use monetary allocation to stimulate Member states' economies, while also incentivising a stronger climate policy. The underlying rationale is that, since actors at all levels of governance *need* the resources to jumpstart their economies, they will be encouraged to put greater effort in meeting environmental imperatives.

Given this premise, understanding NGEU implementation requires dealing with the monetary flows first. That is, if we want to understand the implementation of such a large plan for investments, the first step is to reach a general idea of what the money is being spent on and by whom. Consequently, starting the empirical research, I have chosen to focus on monetary expenditure, trying to reconstruct the key characters of NGEU investments in Genoa and Lisbon. In other words, I have *followed the money* to uncover and trace the elements of the story that are buried beneath the numbers. The underlying logic I followed is to interpret money as a representation of social (and political) behaviour expressed as numbers. Money is countable to the most precise decimal but, being a social institution, it also represents social relations between agents. Empirical evidence about the actors and their relations emerges from monetary flows and allocations, and this paragraph is dedicated to discovering evidence about these aspects.

For both Genoa and Lisbon, elaborating and interpreting expenditure data from official databases was just the starting point of the empirical research. While, in fact, it's possible to discover important details about policy implementation from a critical analysis of the expenditure databases, it only offers a partial account of the story. This part of the research thus represents a preparatory (and yet fundamental) phase of the research that I have conducted preparing for the following in-depth interviews on the field. In essence, following the money allowed me to develop a preliminary idea about the distribution of NGEU investments. Approaching the databases¹⁴ from this perspective is particularly challenging. Starting this work, I opted to choose a local scale of observation coinciding with the municipal area, as both databases presented the possibility to disaggregate NRRP projects based on that same geographical scale.

In the following, I will present the three main characters emerging about the allocation of NGEU money across the local areas: *proliferation* of projects, *ambiguity* in the selection of missions/components, and *scattering* of the beneficiaries/implementers. Below, I will argue that such characteristics combine to paint a picture of great complexity. The data returns a rather puzzling and chaotic picture of territorial investments, reinforcing the need for a more nuanced, in-depth analytical thrust to open the black box of implementation. At the same time, the analysis of the monetary allocation provides some clues related to the two hypothetical scenarios presented in the research design paragraphs. Consequently, the database evidence offers key directions to point the following in-depth interviews. I will present each of the characters separately and elaborate how they guided me to orient the following in-depth phase of the research.

With *proliferation* of projects, I refer to the large number of activities being implemented on the field in both contexts, and the consequent fragmentation of funding into a myriad of small streams (Table 4.1, Figure 4.1).

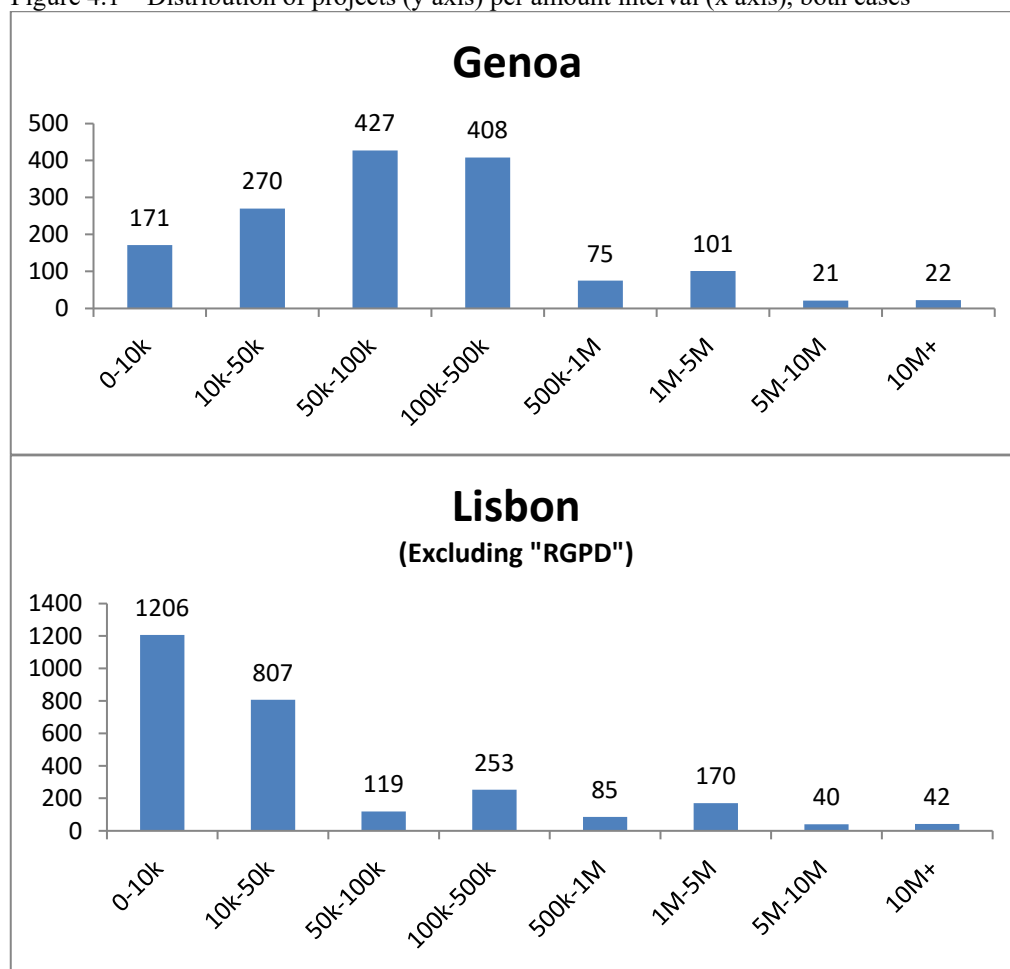
¹⁴ The source of these data has been introduced in chapter 3.4, in the paragraph related to secondary sources of data

Table 4.1 – Total aggregate NGEU investments at the municipal scale

Territory	Total investment (€)	Number of projects	Average budget per project (€)
Genoa	1.392.625.563	1.495	931.522
Lisbon (excluding "RGPD")	2.263.870.071	2.722	831.694

Source: author's own elaboration

Figure 4.1 – Distribution of projects (y axis) per amount interval (x axis), both cases



Source: author's own elaboration

As a preliminary caveat to this elaboration, Lisbon's data presented in the following tables is labelled as "excluding RGPD". This is due to the specifics of the Portuguese NRRP monitoring system. For some of the investment areas (e.g.: job training programs; private building energy efficiency improvements) the data is

classified under the further unspecified “RGPD” label¹⁵. This is due to the projects referring to individual private citizens, whose identity needs to be safeguarded in accordance with European and National guidelines. In most cases, these projects receive less than 1.000€ each, and sometimes less than 100€. This, however, also makes it impossible to elaborate such data, as most key variables are hidden. Since in Lisbon these entries create a lot of “noise” (they reach the staggering number of over 6 thousand “projects”) but they only cover the 0,34% of the total territorial NGEU funding, I have opted to exclude them from the analysis.

This said, about the element of *proliferation* both territories present a substantial volume of investments spreading thin over many projects. In the case of Lisbon, we observe over 2 billion euro spread over 2.700 projects. Similarly, the Genoese case highlights the considerable number of 1.495 projects spread over 1.4 billion euro. More evidence indicating proliferation is the size of the projects. The average size in the two cities is comparable, as in Genoa is around 930 thousand euro, and 830 thousand in Lisbon. However, a better look at their distribution in Figure 4.1 helps us refine this picture. Most Genoese projects are receiving allocations between 50 and 500 thousand euro. In Lisbon, while the order of magnitude is similar, the dynamic is even more accentuated. Here, the biggest share of projects receives less than 10 thousand euro each. These elements portray, for both contexts, a condition of very high fragmentation of the resources into rather small lots. As all projects concur to the EU performance management system based on milestones and targets, the proliferation of projects raises concern over their implementation and monitoring. The number of projects we observe in the two cases exponentially multiplies the administrative load on the implementers, the agencies responsible for the control over the implementation, and reduces the overall transparency of the monetary flows.

About the second characteristic, *ambiguity* in the selection of missions and components, I refer to the impressive diversity of projects included in the formal thematic categories of the NRRPs. Each NRRP, in fact, has provided a series of categories for the classification of projects by area of intervention, hierarchically ordered. In both Italy and Portugal, the basic distinction is in two tiers. The primary tier, known as “missions” (in Italy) or “dimensions” (in Portugal), and the

¹⁵ Portuguese acronym for GDPR, the European General Data Protection Regulation (*Regulamento Geral de Proteção de Dados*).

secondary tier, by the name of “components”. To clarify this point, I provide below a brief overview of the two NRRPs structures.¹⁶

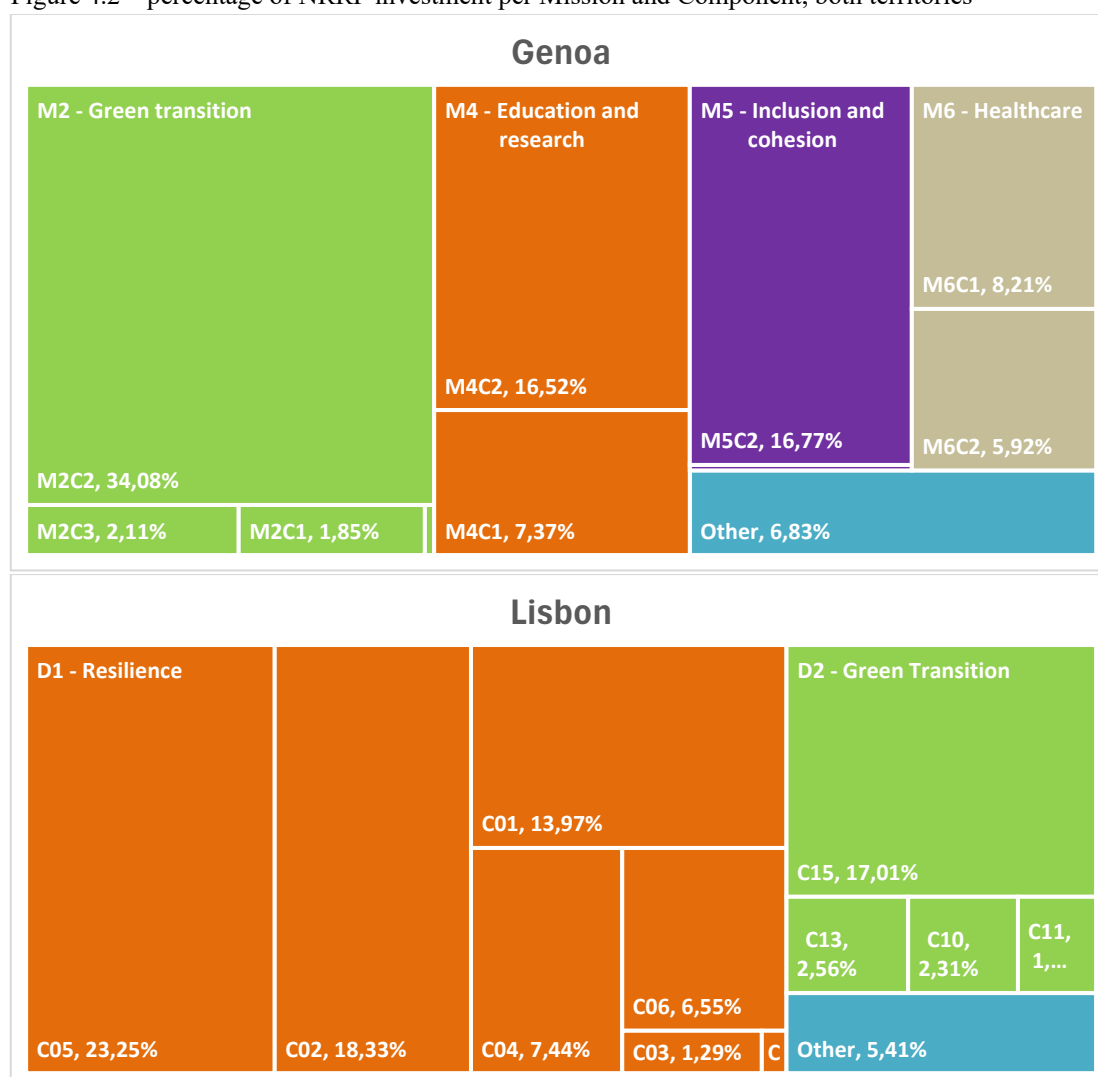
The Italian NRRP (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza, PNRR) divides the two types of NGEU interventions (reforms and investments) into 6 thematic missions, further articulated in 16 components. Mission 1 (Digitalization, Innovation, Competitiveness, and Culture) focuses on modernizing the public administration and justice system, supporting innovation in the private sector, and enhancing the cultural heritage. It comprises three components: digitalization of public administration, innovation and competitiveness of the production system, and tourism and culture 4.0. Mission 2 (Green Revolution and Ecological Transition) aims to accelerate the transition towards sustainability. It includes five components: circular economy and sustainable agriculture, renewable energy and energy efficiency, sustainable mobility, water resource management, and protection of land and sea. Mission 3 (Infrastructure for Sustainable Mobility) concentrates on the development of a modern and integrated transport network. Its two components address rail infrastructure and logistics, with a focus on reducing territorial disparities. Mission 4 (Education and Research) seeks to strengthen the education system and boost research and development. It includes two components: enhancing education and skills and supporting the transfer of skills from research to the economy. Mission 5 (Inclusion and Cohesion) promotes social inclusion and territorial equity. Its three components cover employment policies, social infrastructure, and interventions for territorial cohesion. Mission 6 (Health) aims to improve access to care and strengthen the resilience of the healthcare system. The two components focus on proximity care and telemedicine, and innovation, research, and digitalization in healthcare.

The Portuguese NRRP (Plano de Recuperação e Resiliência, PRR) follows a similar blueprint, with a different “shuffle” between thematic areas. Compared to the Italian counterpart, the plan has less Dimensions, but each of them comprises a greater number of Components. The dimensions are only three: Resilience, Climate Transition, and Digital Transition. These are then divided into 20 components, encompassing NGEU reforms and investments. The Resilience dimension comprises nine components aimed at reinforcing the country's social and economic resilience. These components cover health, housing, social response, culture, business innovation, skills, infrastructure, forestry, and water management. The

¹⁶ In addition to the list provided, both Countries have added a mission/dimension to their plans, to integrate the additional resources from the Repower EU program.

Climate Transition dimension includes the actions for mitigation and adaptation articulated into six components. These include sea economy, industrial decarbonization, sustainable bioeconomy, building energy efficiency, hydrogen and renewables, and sustainable mobility. Finally, the Digital Transition dimension focuses on boosting public and private digital capacity. It comprises four components. These are industry 4.0, public budgeting, economic justice, digitalization in public administration, and digital school.

Figure 4.2 – percentage of NRRP investment per Mission and Component, both territories



Source: author's own elaboration

Missions/Dimensions and Components form the basic division of projects into thematic groups. All the projects funded with NGEU resources must be classified under one (and only one) of these thematic categories. For example, the

digitalization of one thousand films by Lisbon’s Cinema Museum is classified as Dimension 1 “Resilience”, Component 4 “Culture”. The creation of new Ph.D. scholarships by the University of Genoa is classified as Mission 4 “Education and Research”, Component 1 “Enhancement of Research offer”, and so on.

Figure 4.2 presents a simplified overview of the distribution of NGEU investments by missions and components in Genoa and Lisbon (for a complete overview see also Table A3.1 and A3.2 in Appendix 3).

Judging from this figure we get the impression of a clear thematic distinction of the projects within and between territories. Specifically, the Genoese territory seems to prioritize investments on the “green transition” mission (38%), whereas Lisbon seems strongly oriented towards social policy with its priority on the “resilience” dimension (71%). Consequently, the first impression upon observing these data is that Genoa is prioritizing climate action, whereas Lisbon is focusing on social interventions. However, if we scratch the surface and observe the content of these categories, we discover that such classification is not enough to grasp what local NGEU investments are actually about, nor an adequate metric to assess the climate and environmental contribution for these projects. Since every project can fit into only one class, below the surface of the labels emerges a high degree of *ambiguity* in the projects for each mission/dimension and component. First, categories seem to have been intended quite broadly, hence it’s common to find very different projects under the same label. Second, many projects span across multiple components thus making their nominal category only partially representative of the content. A few examples will help to clarify these points.

In Lisbon, under the dimension “Digital Transition”, component “Industry 4.0” (D3C16 in the Portuguese NRRP), are classified roughly 300 projects. Liberally picking from them, we find: the funding of an e-shop for a sunglasses brand¹⁷; the provision of vocational training for the development of digital skills by the local Chamber of Commerce¹⁸; and a start-up incubator managed by Lisbon’s University Faculty of Science¹⁹. While all these actions have something to do with the digitalization of the local economy, the “soft” interpretation of this attribute is self-evident. Quoting other examples in Genoa, under the mission “Inclusion and Cohesion”, component “Social infrastructure, family, community and third sector” (M5C2) we find 69 projects. Among these, take the following two. First, the

¹⁷ Project 14/C16-i02/2023.P7830

¹⁸ Project 03/C16-i01/2022.P1790611

¹⁹ Project 17/C16-i02/2023.P12176

installation of a network of security cameras in the historic centre²⁰. Second, the purchase and restoration of residential units for social housing.²¹ Both projects fall under the same label and even share the same classification in the database. While they answer to the challenges of social degradation and community building, they clearly are very different projects both in their rationale (security and housing), and the practical actions required for implementation.

The choice of these specific examples is arbitrary, but representative of a systematic diversity of activities put under the same label. Many similar examples can be found in both territories, and across all categories. In essence, the same components contain vastly different types of actions, portraying a rather loose interpretation of the categories themselves.

It's not just about variety within the same label, but also about the overlap between them. Here are more exemplar cases from the list of projects in Genoa. Take the following project to increase energy efficiency in cinemas is put under the “Culture” mission (M1C3)²². On its own, this is not particularly controversial, as cinemas are part of the cultural system. At the same time, other project to increase energy efficiency in buildings²³ are put under the “Green transition” mission (M2C3). Further complicating things, other projects restoring and repurposing cinemas are put under the “Inclusion and Cohesion” mission. (M5C2).²⁴ Clearly, there are thematic points of contact between these projects, as each of the three examples provided spans across at least two thematic areas. Understandably, choices have to be made when applying to external funding. My point is, however, that there is *ambiguity* in the themes, by which the division into thematic categories entails a degree of arbitrariness. As a result, the borders between categories are rather fuzzy and imprecise, and cannot be taken as more than a superficial representation of the actual content of the projects.

Taking this ambiguity into account, the division portrayed in figure 4.2 becomes less meaningful, as the thematic division of the NRRP become less reliable in assessing which project contributes to which goal, and who is likely to oversee its implementation.

²⁰ Project B31B21001740001

²¹ Project B37H21000500005

²² Project H35H22000030001

²³ Project F35G20064100007

²⁴ Project B37H21000510005

About this “who”, evidence about fragmentation and ambiguity links with the third character, *scattering* of beneficiaries/implementers. With this I mean the division of projects (and thus resources) across a heterogeneous “bunch” of independent organizations. An interesting point to address is the qualification of such entities as “beneficiaries/implementers” by the two countries. Despite the apparent difference, these entities are, in fact, equivalent in their role and duties. The difference is in nomenclature only, due to difference in each NRRP structure. Whereas the Italian refers to these actors as implementers the Portuguese refers to beneficiaries²⁵. On the surface, such terminological choice seems to stress more the duty of policy implementation in the Italian case against the economic opportunity in the Portuguese case. The word “implementer”, in fact, is more often associated to a formal entity in charge with one or more tasks, whereas “beneficiary” is typically used to define a subject gaining benefit from a policy intervention. Still, if we consult the official definition offered by the Portuguese authorities, a beneficiary (*beneficiário final*) is “an entity responsible for the physical and financial implementation and execution of a reform or investment”²⁶. The same happens in the Italian context where the official definition of implementer (*soggetto attuatore*) is the “entity responsible for the start, implementation and functionality of the project/intervention”²⁷. Since the definitions adopted by both Countries stress the dimension of policy implementation, I will adopt the term “implementers” when referring to such entities.

With *scattering* of the implementers, I refer to the diversity of entities listed with such role. Similarly to the projects’ proliferation, we observe a substantial dispersion of resources across a variety of entities entrusted with the projects’ implementation. Consequently, not only we observe a fragmentation of resources in multiple projects, but also a fragmentation of these projects in the hands of a multitude of independent organizations. While the Genoese case counts 135 entities involved in NGEU projects on its territory, Lisbon stands out with over 1.500 different entities (Table 4.2).

²⁵ I refer here to the entities listed as “beneficiário final” (final beneficiary)

²⁶ Retrieved from <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/lexionario/termo/beneficiario-final-plano-recuperacao-resiliencia> in June 2025 (author’s own translation).

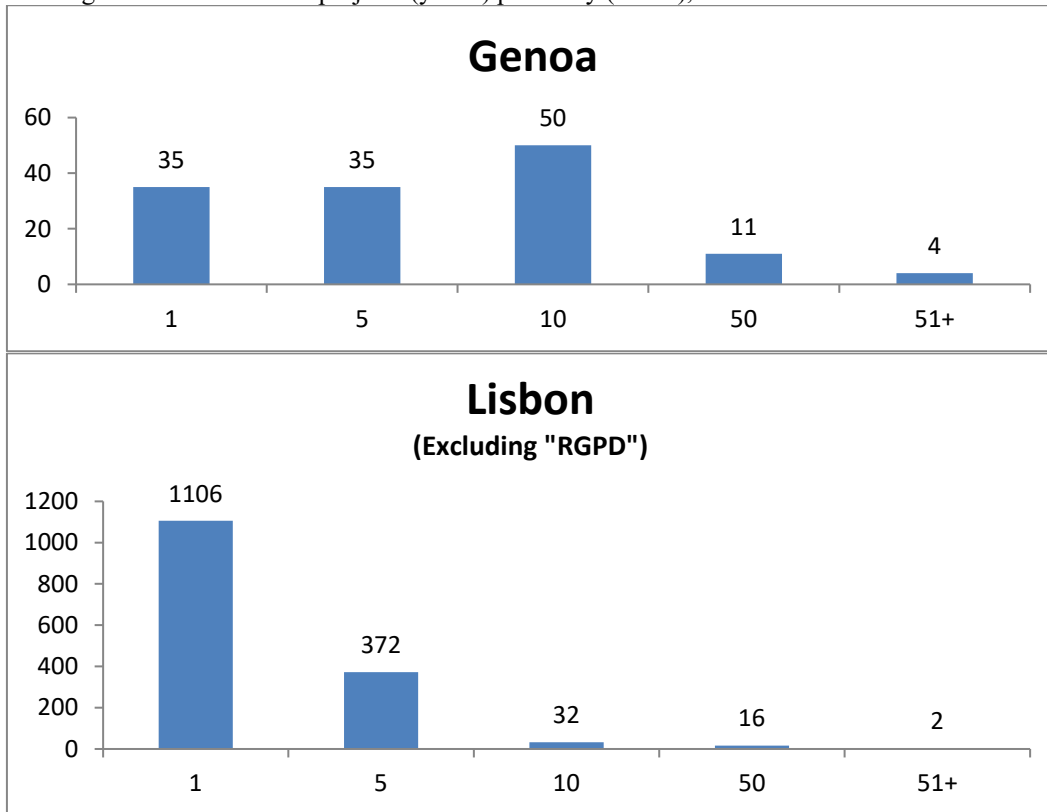
²⁷ Retrieved from <https://assets.innovazione.gov.it/1637581519-allegato-4definizioni-pnrr.pdf> in June 2025 (author’s own translation)

Table 4.2 – Number of entities per territory

Territory	Number of projects	Number of entities
Genoa	1.495	135
Lisbon	2.722	1.528

Source: author's own elaboration

Figure 4.3 – Number of projects (y axis) per entity (x axis), both contexts



Source: author's own elaboration

Focusing on the distribution, we get a good impression of the degree of scattering in the two territories (Figure 4.3). The largest share of implementers in the Genoese case is entitled with less than 10 projects. Roughly one fourth of the implementers are entitled to only one project. Again, this trait is particularly accentuated in Lisbon, where over two thirds of the implementers act on a single project. Another indicator of scattering is the variety of entity types found in the list, which can vary greatly. Unfortunately, none of the two databases offers a precise categorization of the implementers by type, but we can still grasp such variation qualitatively, by picking representative examples from the list. In both territories we find regional administrations, municipalities, universities, schools, hospitals, private companies, public agencies, non-profit associations, and even private citizens. All these actors, with relevant differences in juridical nature, size,

scale of operation, management culture (and more) share the role of “implementers” with the same formal duties. This element clearly adds complexity to the overall picture, as we can expect all these actors to implement their own projects independently from one another and following different logics.

Combined together, effect of these three characteristics – *proliferation* of projects, *ambiguity* in the selection of the missions/components, and *scattering* of implementers – generate an opaque view of NGEU expenditure. Rather than answers, this picture raises further questions about the rationale of NGEU investments, the role of the actors involved, their goals, the choice of the projects, their selection, their state of advancement, and so on. In other words, it’s impossible to grasp any details about the implementation process, which remains, so far, closed into a black box. Even harder is to identify and inquire the integration of climate and environmental goals in the projects, given such a complex mix of actors and activities. In other words, at this scale of observation there’s too many projects and too many actors. As I was trying to explain my work to a non-academic friend, the only definition I could find was “the easy part is understanding that it’s a complete senseless mess. The hard part is to make sense of why that mess is senseless”.

Similar arguments have already been raised by other scholars. At this scale of observation rather than a coherent plan for socio-economic and environmental re-launch, NGEU presents itself as the outcome of the “great feast”, the argument developed from the economic analysis of the Italian NRRP (see Perotti & Boeri, 2023). Tracing connections with classic decision making literature, the “great feast” approximates the outcome of a “garbage can” decision-making model where actors only care about maximising their profit (see Cohen et al., 1972). Very critical towards the plan’s contents, the “great feast” argument portrays Italian’s NRRP as a case of wasted opportunity for economic growth. Instead of long-term strategically placed investments and reforms, the plan seems to contain an intricate mix of short-sighted measures, as if all actors were rushing to the feast to grab their own share of resources.

Taking the elements emerging from the expenditure data I presented, it would be easy to extend the “great feast” interpretation to the cases of Genoa and Lisbon. However, I believe more can be said about the matter, especially if we want to understand how local actors have approached the integration of environmental goals in these projects. The “great feast” argument is compelling, and “money grabbing” could, to some extent, explain such a chaotic aggregate of projects. Yet, this is only a partial explanation of NGEU investments allocation. I believe

inquiring the integration of environmental goals and economic development in NGEU implementation requires contextualization. This means observing the projects *within* the local dynamics in which they are implemented. It is necessary to open the black box of implementation to understand how NGEU projects came to be, where do they fit in the respective local contexts, and how they have been developing.

One aspect this preliminary examination of the databases can do, is hinting at the scenarios traced in the research design paragraph. The high complexity of this implementation environment is already pointing towards the scenario I described as “imperfect implementation”. In other words, how likely can we expect to find strong environmental integration in a context characterized by such an entanglement of actors, revenue streams, and projects? Although too early to exclude the “linear implementation” hypothesis entirely, the empirical data certainly helps in the refinement of the prior expectations. Whereas in NGEU policy design the green-growth dimension is very clear, at the other end of the barrel things look way more complex than could be expected.

To proceed, at this point in research I took two operational choices. On the one hand I needed to reduce the *breadth* of observation as the picture was too complex. On the other hand, I needed to increase *depth* beyond what databases offered. I needed to focus on fewer NGEU projects and study them up-close, within their local context.

As anticipated in the research design paragraph; to achieve this the choice is to focus on the two municipal administrations of Genoa and Lisbon. In both cases, in fact, municipalities emerge from the databases as two key actors among the chaotic ensemble of projects and implementers. In both cases, municipalities are primary actors on the territory, in terms of total NGEU funding. The Municipality of Genoa with 674 million euro (equivalent to 48% of the total territorial allocation) is the largest beneficiary at the territorial level. The Municipality of Lisbon, despite managing only 12% of the total territorial allocation (given the extreme fragmentation described above) is the second largest beneficiary in its area. The first implementer is the Institute for the Lisbon’s Subway management (Metropolitano de Lisboa), holding about 15%.

I thus decided to focus my inquiry only on municipal administrations for the following reasons. First, as we’ve seen, the two municipal administrations hold a central share of NGEU resources. Second, focusing on two municipalities means

comparing apples with apples. Third, their action is also extremely concentrated on key thematic areas. Both municipalities, in fact, have opted to use the vast majority of the NGEU resources in specific thematic sectors. In Genoa, of 674 million, more than 451 are allocated to urban mobility and transportation projects. In Lisbon, of 292 million, more than 250 are allocated to public and social housing. Fourth, investing in both the field of mobility and public housing is strongly conditional to the integration of environmental action in the design of the two NRRPs.

4.2. NGEU investments in the local contexts: path dependence

In the previous section I presented a bird-eye view of the territorial money allocation, highlighting some of the macro-level characters. Moving one step forward, in this section I examine the implementation of the main NGEU investments within the municipalities of Genoa and Lisbon. Before engaging with the issue of environmental integration directly, a key step is missing: how did municipalities chose their investments among the many options available? In other words, before dealing with the environmental aspect it's imperative to contextualize investments within their respective territorial developmental patterns.

In the following, I identify *path dependence* as the primary structural condition guiding NGEU resources allocation in both territories. Specifically, the reconstruction below will show how, in each context, municipal NGEU investments are characterized by a pre-existent continuity. They can be framed as the outcome of processes involving either positive feedback (*self-reinforcing* path dependence) or counter-reaction (*reactive* path dependence) (Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2004; David, 2007). In both dynamics, existing structures (i.e.: institutions) constrain the actors embedded in the process making deviations from the existing path increasingly less convenient (see Fioretos et al., 2016, pp. 3–31).

Reconstructing the historical development of the policy patterns in Lisbon and Genoa, in the analysis below I argue that municipal administrations used NGEU to give continuation to pre-existing, institutionalized courses of policymaking. Specifically, both municipalities used the NGEU resources to address longstanding local policy problems (transportation in Genoa, and housing in Lisbon). In essence, municipal actors funnelled NGEU resources into policies which were largely in place prior to the European programme. This reflects a broader pattern in which external funding opportunities – such as NGEU – are re-shaped by local actors functionally to their existing goals.

Other than providing the actual representations of the path dependence mechanism in the two cases, the following section further updates the tentative hypotheses presented in the research design. Grounded in the opinions of the interviewees, emerges a striking void: environmental policy. This apparent lack of concern for the environment despite NGEU conditionality is what moves me further towards the “imperfect implementation” scenario, and will be the core of the following paragraph 4.3.

Genoa: the urban mobility-logistics nexus

In this paragraph, I will contextualize NGEU investments in the case of Genoa. As stated above, Genoa’s municipality has adopted a clear focus of NGEU investments on the topic of urban mobility and public transportation infrastructure. Specifically, 451 million euro are allocated on only 5 projects, managed by the Smart Mobility Direction and the Project Management Office for Great Transportation Infrastructures (Table 4.3), under the political direction of the Cabinet of the mobility councillor. These are, respectively the new “four axes” of public transportation, the purchase of electric buses, the opening of a new subway station, and two initiatives for cycling mobility.

Table 4.3 – Main NGEU projects funded by Genoa’s municipality

Projects	Amount NGEU resources	Total cost of the project	Description
“Four axes” of public transportation	350.000.000,00	498.251.029,62	Introduction of a network of electric trolleybuses along 4 routes across the urban area
Electric bus coaches purchase	51.453.275,00	51.453.275,00	Renewal of the municipal bus fleet via purchase of electric vehicles
Corvetto subway station	43.899.106,52	56.206.849,23	Inauguration of a new subway station on the existing line
Cycling mobility for universities	3.426.814,00	3.426.814,00	Strengthening of the intermodal connections between university venues
New cycling lanes	2.997.612,03	3.023.002,11	Implementation of new share-use cycling lanes in the city streets
Total	451.776.807,55	612.360.969,96	

Source: author’s own elaboration

The “4 axes” project is clearly playing the main role in NGEU allocation, being the biggest project in the hands of the municipality. This project is ambitious and aims at implementing a new system of public transportation along 4 routes (the “axes”) spanning across the city. The Levante (east) and Ponente (west) routes

stretching along the whole urban coastline; the Bisagno Valley route spanning north-south along the Bisagno River; and the Central route connecting the others through the city centre. Once completed, the axes would form the new centrepiece for urban public transportation, around which the other lines of the public mobility network should be connected. Consisting of trolley buses, the routes have been planned as a hybrid between a tramway and a traditional bus line. Like a tramway, the design of the project provides a vast stretch of dedicated lanes and synchronized traffic lights, with the goals of establishing priority for public transports over private vehicles, reducing waiting times, and achieving faster, more efficient transportation for users. Like a traditional bus line, the choice of the trolley bus is more flexible than tramways, especially considering the dense urbanization and narrow roads typical of the Genoese landscape.

Supporting the 4 axes, and regenerating the whole public mobility system, the second project allocates 51 million of NGEU funds to the purchase of electric buses for the municipal fleet. As in many other cities, the existing fleet is composed of obsolescent fossil-fuelled coaches. This project aims to renew the fleet in an environmentally friendly manner, via the purchase of electric buses.

The third project uses NGEU funds to inaugurate the Corvetto subway station. Planned since the original opening of Genoa's subway line in the 1990s, the basic infrastructure for the station Corvetto was built during the original subway construction works. However, at the time it was never completed and then indefinitely postponed. NGEU funds offered the chance to finish the works and inaugurate the new station.

Finally, the third and fourth projects target the implementation of cycling mobility, with a specific focus on the student population moving across the city to reach the various university venues. As shown by the sums allocated, these projects are rather marginal in the overall scheme.

The first, relevant element to point out in relation to these projects, is that none of these initiatives has been specifically designed to accommodate NGEU resources. All these projects predate the arrival of the European intervention. Definitive proof of this element is given by the 2019 edition of the Genoese Urban Plan for Sustainable Mobility, which already included all the five actions before the advent of the pandemic, when a European intervention like NGEU was not even imagined.

In the plan, it was already clear “the complete electrification of the axes” (p. 236) and “also a rationalization of the overall urban public transportation” around this major intervention (p.147). The same document also includes that among the options “the results have favoured the choice of the trolleybus line” among the other options (p. 147). The fleet electrification was also not just envisioned but planned: “in particular in the Genoese municipality, by 2025 the public transport fleet shall be (gradually) replaced with electric vehicles” (p. 131). As for the other projects, the plan also includes the subway line “which will be later equipped with another station in Corvetto (already partially realized)” (p. 149), and the cycling lanes, which will “connect the main train stations, cruise and ferry terminals, the Levante Waterfront, the Old Port, tourist locations, and many university venues” (p. 162).

The main issue in the 2019 mobility plan was defining priority based on available funding, as the document was centred around various “scenarios” detailing on the number and order of actions to be implemented, depending on the availability of adequate resources. This is the scenario in which NGEU inserts itself and explains why, as shown in Table 4.3, NGEU resources do not cover the total cost of the main projects (i.e.: the “four axes” and Corvetto station). Being already planned, these projects had previous financial covering from other sources, although partial. The choice of the municipality has thus been to co-finance these works with other external sources of funding. These elements hint to the presence of other dynamics that need to be unpacked to understand NGEU spending.

Doing so, I will take a detour from the specifics of NGEU, as I need to introduce key recent development of the Genoese political economy. This is necessary to the construction of the overall argument, as it’s in this pattern that NGEU investments are framed.

Besides the connections between NGEU projects and existing planning documents, their origin and justification can be traced back to the longer history of Genoa’s development in the past decades. The city, in fact, is involved in an intensive effort for infrastructural development, recently culminated in the announcement of the “Genoa 2030” strategy. During March 2024, the (now former) Mayor of Genoa publicly presented “Genoa 2030” as the development agenda of the municipal administration in charge²⁸. This agenda, represented on a large map (see Appendix 4), was divided into two main sections: “urban regeneration” and

²⁸ <https://smart.comune.genova.it/comunicati-stampa-articoli/mipim-2024-cannes-il-comune-di-genova-presenta-la-citt%C3%A0-del-2030>

“infrastructures and port reorganization”. The content of this ambitious agenda includes 47 infrastructural and 106 urban regeneration initiatives. Quite surprisingly, there isn’t a public programmatic document accompanying the map, which remains the only actual representation of the strategy on paper. I had the occasion to see copies of this map in person, printed in large format and hanged to the walls of many offices I visited during my interviews. Still, it’s hard to find digital copies of this map, if not through the websites of local media outlets, hence the sub-optimal resolution of the copy provided in Appendix 4. More than just a plan, Genoa 2030 is a political statement. It’s the visual representation of the medium-term political goals of the dominant interests involved in the economic development of the city: economic growth via maritime logistics and attraction of investments for urban regeneration.

Going back a further step, since post-war de-industrialization Genoa lost its former place as one of the industrial capitals of Italy, slowly entering a phase of economic, demographic, and social recession (Guala, 2003; Gazzola & Terenzi, 2021; Bigatti, 2023). Economically bound to its port, Genoa’s developmental pathway has always been focused on the sea. The last decades have seen substantial growth of maritime trade from the East passing through Suez, especially with the Chinese Belt and Road initiative. Genoa has tried to re-gain importance as the primary port of the country, as well as enhancing its competitiveness against foreign European trading ports. In other words, Genoa has found itself in a peculiar position. On the one hand, the city has the chance to profit from its strategic position and expand its logistic importance at the European level, becoming a transportation node connecting the mediterranean with Central Europe. On the other hand, two interconnected challenges stand in the way of Genoa’s success as a logistical hub. First, the port must substantially increase its capacity. Second, as it’s physically impossible to expand in the urbanized surroundings, the transportation network must improve to absorb and stock the increased volume of goods elsewhere.

The central piece of the Genoa 2030 strategy – addressing the first challenge – is the Breakwater project, a massive infrastructure for the expansion and modernization of the port. In maritime engineering, a “breakwater dam” is a solid wall preventing open sea waves to reach the inner part of the port. It protects the shoreline, and allows for steady waters in the port, where ships have to manoeuvre, harbour, and operate. The new Genoa Breakwater (Area “4a” in Appendix 4) consists in the demolition of the existing breakwater dam, to be supplanted by the construction of a new, larger one, roughly further 450m offshore.

The sheer size of the investment is impressive, being currently financed for 1.3 billion euro, making it one of the biggest infrastructural investments in Italy. Of these resources, 500 million come from the Italian Complementary Fund, a dedicated plan to integrate NGEU with resources from the National budget. The use of these resources for the project also makes it mandatory to complete the works by 2026, a key strategic decision. On the one hand, this choice has pressed the accelerator on the project, especially after a long phase of scepticism about the feasibility and the public acceptance of the project by the residents (Di Martino & Mersini, 2022). On the other hand, it exposes the project to risks of delays or corner-cutting, given the late start of the works in June 2024. Worsening the scenario, the corruption scandal that developed in the same months, involving the Port administration, entrepreneurs and local politicians could significantly impact the roadmap (Curti, 2024).

The goal of the new Breakwater is to allow an increase in number and dimension of container ships entering the docks, with a substantial growth in the port's competitiveness. The official analysis from the Port management authority estimates an increase in traffic from roughly 1.5 to 2.0 million TEU²⁹ from 2026 to 2027 (+33%) reaching 2.4 million in 2044 (+60%) (Ports Of Genoa, 2021). However, the city of Genoa does not currently have sufficient space to stock these goods, given the combination of extensive urbanization and mountainous terrain (see Appendix 4). As a result, even current volumes of cargo are barely manageable. For this reason, the Genoa 2030 strategy connects the Breakwater to an overall re-arrangement of the port spaces.

This connects to the second challenge for Genoa's development central to understand the roots of NGEU spending: transportation. Endemic to the territory, transportation has always been a fundamental problem for Genoa. Since the past century, traffic congestion has been a widespread problem. A combination of thick, unruly urbanization, narrow streets, abundance of cars, and heavy haul transportation from and to the port. This led to various phases of infrastructural intervention. Already in the 1960s the construction of the elevated road cutting through the city (the "Sopraelevata") was supposed to solve congestion in the city. A cumbersome infrastructure, the Sopraelevata quickly became part of the problem it wished to solve. Later, with the debate around the "Gronda" highway junction, Genoa tried yet again to ease the traffic impacting on the urban area. Still, after decades of planning, territorial conflicts, stops, and restarts (see Pomatto, 2011) the

²⁹ Freight container unit of measure

Gronda is still awaiting realization. Recently, amid the gradual decline in territorial infrastructural investments and maintenance (Musso et al., 2021), the issue of mobility and logistics reached a critical point with the collapse of the Polcevera highway bridge in August 2018. This tragic event took 43 lives, and strained the already overburdened city's road system (Beltrami et al., 2021).

The repeated effort in the infrastructural development of the area is both the engine and the crux of Genoese development. The main source of economic wealth of the city, the port, substantially contributes to worsen one of the most trafficked areas in the whole Country. In the words of one interviewee:

“The main accesses to the port [...] are not completely independent from urban traffic. The solution that is being pursued is the creation of so-called buffer zones on the highway network outside Genoa, in such a way that the vehicles destined for the port of Genoa can stop in this sort of “service station” where they can also carry out customs procedures [...] in the time window in which they do not conflict, or conflict as little as possible, with city traffic. It is a project, in my opinion, of doubtful effectiveness. For the simple reason that Genoa's road-system is plagued by almost constant congestion. The truck drivers absolutely must reach the ferry on time [...]. They wouldn't trust staying in the buffer area until 30 minutes before, just because they have completed all the documents. The problem is if they get stuck at an intersection where they lose two hours and miss the ship. So, in my opinion, this thing will work when the Genoese highways will work. Since at the moment they are at a breaking point, in my opinion no driver would use them, even if they existed” (Int. 13, Genoa – Consultant)

At the regional level, the main solution to the logistical challenge is the so-called Third Pass (*Terzo Valico*), a high speed trainline passing the Apennines and connecting Genoa with the northern Italian flatland. This solution would enable a fast and effective shipping of goods via train from the docks to the open spaces of the flatlands (Lami, 2007). Discussed since the 70s³⁰ and started in the 90s, the works on the railway have progressed extremely slow. The final node of the railway, inside the urban area of Genova (the “last mile”) has proven to be the most difficult. Still to be completed to this day, the construction process has been

³⁰http://www.archiviolaStampa.it/component/option,com_lastampa/task,search/mod,libera/action,viewer/Itemid,3/page,6/articleid,1095_01_1977_0177_0006_16015084/

characterized by delay after delay. The last one moving the deadline from 2025 to 2027, even though rumours have already started to surface for 2030³¹.

To further address the issue of transportation, the strategy for Genoa 2030 includes further infrastructural interventions addressing the issue of traffic in the city. First, to demolish the 1960s elevated road, substituted with the audacious project of an underwater tunnel running below the port, for the cost of 1 billion €. Second, the extension of the subway line for a total of 308 million €, of which the Corvetto station (funded with NGEU) is part of.

This considered, the choice to use NGEU resources to fund mobility projects becomes unsurprising. The problems of traffic congestion and urban mobility are historically central in the municipal agenda. I often asked the interviewees to tell me about the problems and challenges in NGEU projects implementation. I was surprised by the shared consensus over the problem of traffic congestion, portraying clear internalization of this problem as a central issue in their work as policymakers.

“The problem is managing the acceptance of the inconvenience of construction sites. Now, the construction of the transportation “axes” will start all over the city. It will make Genoa a city in which moving around is a struggle” (Int. 1, Genoa –public administrator)

“They’re building the Breakwater in the sea [...] but I also have to think about a whole series of things like the transport of materials to build the dam. But not only that, also [...] the underwater tunnel [...]. When digging will begin, a specific construction area will be created. [...] The whole construction site is above ground and will impact the city. [...] It interferes with part of the city’s road system. [...] There are lanes narrowing, changes in traffic flow [...] it really becomes difficult to think that works of such importance would not, in some way, affect all the municipality” (Int. 12, Genoa – public administrator)

“Now we’re making an analysis of the projects in the Genoese area needing excavation material, and the ones producing it. This way we can manage the projects and do what we can to minimize the transport of material on the territory of Genoa [...]. We will try moving the material

³¹<https://www.rainews.it/tgr/piemonte/articoli/2025/07/rischia-di-slittare-ancora-linaugurazione-del-terzo-valico-6458727a-26d8-4fea-8dac-4070fc2a4b56.html>

over sea, to avoid transportation on roads” (Int. 10, Genoa – public administrator)

Overall, despite accounting for substantial investments at first sight, NGEU projects pale in comparison to the other projects involving the urban area that mobilize billions of euros. NGEU investments in Genoa are a small piece in a wider history of infrastructural development. Urban congestion and mobility have long been a thorn in the flesh of Genoa’s development, explaining the focus on public transportation infrastructure given to NGEU investments by the municipal administration.

“Now, you understand, if you make a project based on dedicated bus lanes where the vehicles can travel without congestion – therefore at a much higher speed – they become much more attractive than private traffic that is stuck in a queue” (Int. 13, Genoa – Consultant)

“The people living up there, must drive down all that road every day, from working-class valleys and neighbourhoods, to go to work. It’s an endless queue with traffic lights, intersections, construction sites. There are no fast public transportation lines [...] The goal is to bring them to the centre in 10 minutes” (Int. 12, Genoa – public administrator)

The effort to expand the public transportation infrastructure, to which NGEU projects contribute, must be framed into this concern over urban mobility and traffic congestion. This, in turn, is embedded in a long history of infrastructural development dependent on the expansion of the port. In this picture, NGEU projects fit within a *self-reinforcing* path dependent policy pattern (Mahoney, 2000). Put bluntly, municipal offices are full of available, ready-made mobility projects that only await an opportunity of funding. The existence of a long history of infrastructural development, the internalization of traffic as one of the main local policy problems, and the contingent expansion of the port in the near future combine in a positive feedback loop. To municipal actors, acting on mobility is the most sensible thing to do, and deviating from this course of action would be less convenient than maintaining it.

NGEU resources fit seamlessly within the peculiarities of the geographic area, the economic priorities of the city, and its political agenda. Investing in public transportation is the instrument available to the municipal administration to feed an established pathway of decisions. To Genoese administrators, NGEU is thus as an injection of resources into an historically established course of action.

“It’s the same old problem. The NRRP and NGEU, “the recovery plan”, that instrument, was born because the European Commission has made the budget available and then unleashed it. It was clearly made to inject an economy that was suffering. In the end, where was it invested? In what we already had, in infrastructures. [...] So, it wasn’t used as a tool to reprogram the city, but as a budgetary tool to realize what we already had to do.” (Int. 1, Genoa – public administrator)

Lisbon: trying to catch up on the housing bubble

Similarly to the previous, this paragraph will contextualize NGEU spending by Lisbon’s municipality into the dynamics of local development. As anticipated, the municipal action in Lisbon has focused the NGEU investments on the topic of public housing. The projects are 63 in total, but they are virtually identical in their content and can be grouped under the three clusters in Table 4.4 managed by the Housing and Local Development Direction (*Direção Municipal de Habitação e Desenvolvimento Local*) and the Municipal Maintenance and Conservation Direction (*Direção Municipal de Manutenção e Conservação*), under the political direction of the Cabinet of the Housing councillor.

Table 4.4 – Main NGEU projects funded by Lisbon’s municipality

Projects	Amount NGEU resources	Description
New dwellings	205.746.080,37	Construction of 1.327 new dwellings for social housing
Renovations	32.760.136,67	Renovation of 814 existing dwellings for social housing
Students’ accommodation	12.017.040,00	Renovation of 1 building owned by the municipality to be destined as university students’ residence.
Total	250.523.257,04	

Source: author’s own elaboration

Almost the entirety of the resources allocated to the Lisbon’s municipality is being spent over these three actions. More than two thirds (about 205 million) are dedicated to building new dwellings. These are over a thousand (1.327) housing units across various areas of the city. The second action is similar but directed at the renovation of existing buildings owned by the municipality, for a total of 814 housing units. The third is the renovation of one additional building, to be converted into accommodation for university students, for a total of 320 rooms.

More importantly for this research, all the housing projects funded with NGEU resources must comply with strict energy efficiency standards. This makes housing projects, formally under the “resilience” dimension, also valid for NGEU green spending requirement (37% of the total national allocation). This is because, as specified in the Portuguese NRRP documentation, all renovations and new constructions under the housing component will be counted for the achievement of the climate targets in the measure of 40% of their value.³²

Differently than in Genoa, in the case of Lisbon these projects are not co-financed. In other words, Lisbon’s administration opted to cover the individual construction and renovations with NGEU resources in full. At the same time, the allocation of NGEU resources remains puzzling at first sight, as it’s not clear why, among the thematic components of the Portuguese NRRP, Lisbon’s municipality has chosen to concentrate its investments on this specific topic. Once again, the answer to this question comes from the surrounding context in which the NGEU projects are implemented. The issue of housing, in fact, has emerged as a main public concern across Portugal, but is causing great concerns in Lisbon, as it recently spiked uncontrollably. The roots of this problem, however, are rather deep and entered the public agenda after decades of neglect.

In Portugal, housing policy has gone through various phases, although occupying a secondary place when compared to other areas of social policy. Following the works of Antunes (2018) and Allegra and colleagues (2022), we can trace the history of Portuguese housing policies since the Carnation revolution, and the establishment of the republic in 1974. Already then, social dynamics have been loading the housing sector with increasing burden. With regime change and the collapse of the colonial empire, the country experienced a peak in immigration from the former colonies. For many of these people, the only solution was the creation of unauthorized settlements at the outskirts of the main urban centres like Lisbon and Porto. These informal solutions, known as “the barracks” (*barracas*) persisted until the 1990s. In the meantime, national housing policy prioritized measures in support of private homeownership, following the established preference of Mediterranean Countries, essentially limiting policy measures to the management of mortgage interest rates.

³² Source: <https://dados.gov.pt/s/resources/documentacao-do-prr/20210502-190339/25-20210421-componentec02vf.pdf>

In the 2010s, with the Great Recession, the crisis opened a new phase for housing policy. Important housing market reforms were linked to the bailout negotiations between the government and the *Troika*. Housing reforms thus became part of the austerity measures attempting to rationalize and reduce public spending (Tulumello et al., 2020). The result was the deregulation of the rental market in an attempt to mobilize the economy and attract foreign and domestic investors. Around the same period, in Lisbon, local dynamics layered on top of these events generating heavy externalities on the housing market in a classic example of *gentrification* (Estevens et al., 2023). First, since the 1990s, the degrading condition of older buildings started a process of relocation of the residents from the historic centre towards newer constructions in the outskirts (Seixas, 2021). Second, the deregulation of the housing market attracted speculative interests, given the abundance of cheap uninhabited housing stock to be reconverted into tourist accommodation and short-term rentals. Third the advent of the *gig economy* platforms after 2010 (e.g.: Uber, Airbnb, etc.) supported the uncontrolled touristification of Lisbon, further inflating the housing market with the boom of short-term rentals (Sciuva, 2025b). This process sustains itself in a vicious circle, encouraging the residents' relocation towards the suburbs, and reinforcing the speculation on central housings (Antunes & Ferreira, 2021; Seixas, 2021; Esteves et al., 2023). Between 2011 and 2021, while the city was experiencing a 1% decrease in population, the central neighbourhoods scored an impressive 19% decline. In the same years, short-term rental licenses increased from 1.000 to over 19.000 (Estevens et al., 2023).

Similar dynamics involved other tourist destinations like the area of Porto and Algarve, but Lisbon saw the most impressive escalation. This led experts and social movements alike to mobilize asking political intervention to safeguard vulnerable citizens and families against housing speculation (Mendes, 2020). The issue was also picked up by the UN special rapporteur on Housing in a dedicated report (Farha, 2017). This pressure forced the topic back into the agenda of the left-wing national government. With a stark change of pace, the government introduced a series of instruments to curb the issue of housing, respectively the *New Generation of Housing Policies*³³ in 2018 and the *Framework Law for Housing* in 2019³⁴. The first is a legislative package containing new policy measures for the relaunch of social housing (the *Primeiro Direito* program) and a system of economic incentives

³³ Cabinet Resolution 50-A/2018 (<https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/resolucao-conselho-ministros/50-a-2018-115211109>)

³⁴ Law 83/2019 (<https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/83-2019-124392055>)

for landlords to rent their properties within an affordable rental scheme (*Programa de Arrendamento Acessível*). The second, the Framework Law, consolidated the new approach in defence of the tenant rights, while also providing local governments with concrete new policy tools such as the Municipal Chart for Housing, strengthening the importance of affordable housing in territorial planning.

In an unexpected turn of events, the pandemic crisis hit right after the introduction of this “new course”. On the one hand, the lockdown reaffirmed the importance of safeguarding housing as a universal right. On the other hand, the pandemic popularized new forms of remote labour and lifestyles, like the so-called *digital nomadism* (Sciuva, 2025a). The opportunity to work remotely in countries with a lower cost of living generated a new migratory trend of workers from wealthy countries. Lisbon became one of hubs of this trend, thanks to the combination of infrastructures (physical and economic), a wide offer of short-term rents, and a rich offer of leisure activities. This impressed new traction to housing market speculations, driving prices even further up the spiral of inflation (Sciuva, 2025b). In response to the growing dissatisfaction, the left-wing government reinforced the recent measures with the “More Housing” directive³⁵ (*Mais Habitação*) of 2023. Despite including important dispositions reinforcing the recent reforms (e.g.: more economic incentives for affordable renting), this new law has been criticised for its “radical” orientation. Specifically, heavy criticism has developed around the controversial provision giving municipalities the ability to coercively rent private houses uninhabited for at least two years (Travasso & Alves, 2024). Following these criticisms, the newly appointed right-wing government has partially rolled back the previous government actions in 2024, reforming parts of the 2023 law³⁶.

Lisbon’s NGEU investments, thus, must be framed inside this course of events. The decision of the Portuguese NRRP to include housing as one of the components of the plan fits seamlessly within the recent historical evolution of the territory. Specifically, NGEU resources represent an unexpected economic boost to implement policy tools that had been recently introduced with national housing reforms but needed substantially more resources for their implementation locally. The decision by the central government to include the housing component in the NRRP reflects the need to finance the recent social housing program *Primeiro Direito*. In addition, other contextual conditions cemented the decision of the municipality to focus its NGEU investments on social housing. For example,

³⁵ Law 56/2023 (<https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/56-2023-222477692>)

³⁶ Decree 57/2024 (<https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/57-2024-887319191>)

Lisbon's municipality is the largest property owner in the whole country, owning up to 30 thousand housing units, many of which in a run-down state of conservation³⁷. It is thus clear how the urban housing market dynamics, incrementally worsening especially in Lisbon and Porto, is the key driver in the evolution of national social housing reforms, upon which NGEU investments are layered.

In Lisbon specifically, NGEU represents a window of opportunity boost existing housing policy measures, for which resources had been scarce or insufficient for decades, even following national reforms. The public housing sector was suffering from a longstanding, chronic lack of resources, to which nor national, nor European resources had been given to compensate prior to NGEU. Below, two quotes from the interviews portray this dynamic:

“It is kind of a compensatory structure. [...] For example, about social housing. We didn't have money for social housing since the URBAN programs; you were young then! [...]. It is [NGEU, ed.] one of the ways to overcome the problem of housing is outside of the strategy [...] 14-20 [Cohesion Fund, ed.], about poverty, which was more about social policy, employment and training. In some cases, they could integrate some housing renovations with this program, but there was not enough money. [...] So, it is an opportunity! And now for 21-27 [Cohesion Fund, ed.], we don't have it again.” (Int. 17, Lisbon – Analyst)

“But how many people municipalities have, that live in poor conditions? Or that have “undignified housing”. [...] “Primer Direito” was the response. And because that response was not fast enough and not well funded, The NRRP gave us an opportunity to make this faster, it's an Injection. [...] Is like an accelerator. The NRRP just gives the opportunity to accelerate in some part of the way. Is a boost, a big help but the main goal is to solve housing, the main problem of the decade. The goal is to do a big step in one decade that we didn't do in 30 years before. We have to solve this generation's housing problem” (Int. 18, Lisbon – Public administrator)

The prioritization of housing projects within NGEU investments by the municipal administration of Lisbon is thus following a *reactive* path dependence sequence

³⁷ Source: <https://ionline.sapo.pt/2024/05/28/filipa-roseta-a-camara-e-a-maior-proprietaria-do-pais/>

(Mahoney, 2000). In reactive sequences, the historical continuity builds around a pattern in which decisions follow each other in a reaction-counterreaction pattern. NGEU investments in Lisbon follow this trend, in which a new course of local and national housing policy has developed as a reaction to increasingly pressing housing problems within the urban area of Lisbon. The constant tension between market liberalizations for the attraction of investors and the attempts to curb growing inequalities in the inflated housing market portray a reactive sequence. This pushed the municipality to dedicate NGEU funds to implement existing policy instruments, introduced by housing reforms in the previous years, but lacking resources.

“And you have this clash between [...] these two main ideas. One, the recipe that we have had so far, regardless of the pain it causes, regardless of the cost: tourists and touristification. You know, the financialization of housing, and so on. So, this places us on a map. If we take this away, the big question is what replaces it? So, on the other hand, you have the big discussion from the social point of view: this is basically unsustainable”
(Int. 28, Lisbon – Scholar)

4.3. Integrating NGEU with environmental action: the dog that didn’t bark

Having placed NGEU implementation in the context of the two local cases, I have now reached a general understanding of how local actors have taken the EU resources and transformed them into place-based actions. Thus, I have reached a point from which it’s possible to give a meaningful answer to the research questions at the end of Chapter 1.

The evidence that composes the path-dependent explanation of NGEU resources allocation also highlights a key feature central to this research. Instead of playing a central role, as envisioned in European discourse, the environmental element is rather marginal in both processes of local implementation.

From this perspective, path dependence characterizes as a key contextual dynamic that has strong implications for environmental integration. However, path dependence alone is not enough to explain if and how environmental integration took place. To do so, we need to gain further evidence about the fine-grain dynamics that directly affect environmental integration.

Through incremental update and refinement, at this stage of the research I gained confidence I was observing a process closer to the “imperfect implementation” scenario envisioned in the research design. This contrast between the EU expectations and the territorial course of events was confirmed during my attempts to discuss the issue of environmental action with interviewees working in offices holding direct competence over NGEU projects. There, the issue of integrating environmental policy appeared trivial, somewhat secondary.

“We tried to invest in some passive strategies, not so much in active ones. We tried to improve the insulations, we tried to improve the windows, the requirements are a bit lighter in the rehabilitation than in new construction. [...] The requirement is lighter. So, we can manage that, and we are trying to act in that way” (Int. 23, Lisbon – public administrator)

This is especially puzzling since, in theory, the projects in both territories should contribute to the achievement of NGEU green spending conditions. In Genoa, the mobility projects contribute to the climate goal entirely, as 100% of the expenditure on mobility is accounted for the target³⁸. In Lisbon, housing projects contribute to a lesser, but still relevant extent to the overall green spending goal of the NRRP (40%).³⁹

Given these elements it would be reasonable to find actual instances of integration between the municipal sectors entrusted with NGEU spending (mobility sector in Genoa, housing sector in Lisbon) and their counterparts managing environmental and/or climate sectors in the municipal administration.

Addressing the first research question, “*Is the implementation of NGEU fostering the integration of environmental action in local policymaking?*”, in the paragraphs below I will present and discuss the empirical evidence about the (lack of) stimulus given by NGEU to the integration of environmental elements in municipal policymaking processes. Making a literary parallel, in *Silver Blaze* – Sherlock Holmes’ novel – it’s the *absence* of barking by the dog that reveals something crucial about the nature of the crime and the identity of the culprit. Similarly, in the following paragraphs it’s the evidence about policy integration’s

³⁸ Source: https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/PNRR_RiformeInvestimentiMissioni.pdf

³⁹ Source: <https://dados.gov.pt/s/resources/documentacao-do-prr/20210502-190339/25-20210421-componentec02vf.pdf>

absence that will uncover key elements about the cases and suggest new theoretical insights.

To structure the paragraph I will use the heuristic framework of *substantive* (law-based) or *procedural* (actor-based) integration (Metz et al., 2020; Bolognesi et al., 2021; Dorado-Rubín et al., 2025), including the findings about integration phenomena which involve the municipal sectors in charge of NGEU implementation, and their environmental counterparts. In the following, *substantive*, or *law-based*, integration refers to the interlinkage of policy contents, meaning the degree to which different issues are connected in policy outputs (i.e.: the tangible decisions, laws, regulations, or strategic documents that governments produce). *Procedural*, or *actor-based* integration refers to the actual instances of cooperation between individuals and/or organizations in the process (i.e.: meetings, cross-sectoral cooperation protocols, agreements, etc.).

Below, I will present my analysis of the empirical evidence linked to both types of integration phenomena, leading to the emergence of three patterns of events that put them in common. The contents are also summarized in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5 – Evidence about substantial and procedural integration from the cases

Integration type	Empirical evidence	Pattern of events
Substantive	Absence of dedicated design	Nominal integration of environmental goals in NGEU projects
	Assumption of environmental achievements a-priori	
	Indeterminacy in DNSH application	
	Missing links between local climate frameworks and NGEU projects	Prevalence of money capture/budget maximisation objectives
	Local climate frameworks are mainly aimed at budget maximisation	
Procedural	Centrality of resources in tracing the boundaries of environmental sectors	Lack of inter-sectoral cooperation agreements or practices
	Lack of involvement of environmental and climate sectors	
	Offices managing NGEU project focus on “internal” collaboration	

Source: Author’s elaboration

The nominal integration of environmental goals

A first pattern of events clearly identifiable during interviews is the lack of substantive integration of environmental goals in NGEU projects, replaced by nominal contributions instead. Three types of evidence portray this phenomenon: absence of a dedicated design phase; assumption of environmental contribution a-priori; and indeterminacy in DNSH application (see Table 4.5 above).

The first and more immediate element is the lack of a dedicated planning phase for NGEU investments in both cases, which has resulted in the paucity of specific policy outputs by municipal administrations. Much of the elements leading to this conclusion descend directly from the previous discussion of the path dependent patterns of expenditure in the two municipalities. Both cities have funnelled NGEU resources into pre-established decisions, meaning that municipalities chose to implement existing policy tools, without the need to design new interventions nor policy outputs. This phenomenon is perhaps most apparent in Genoa where, as shown in Paragraph 4.2, the main projects funded with NGEU had been already in an advanced stage of design for years and just needed a money stream. Sometimes resources were already allocated from alternative sources, which NGEU just complemented or replaced. In the case of Lisbon, the design of individual micro-level projects was not as advanced as in Genoa before the launch of NGEU. However, as we've shown, also here the EU programme entered an existing policy stream, without the formulation of integrated in policy outputs.

A second set of evidence highlights how the conditions for environmental integration imposed by the NGEU have been met within the projects, although only nominally. Environmental conditions are addressed in two ways. The first is *green tagging*, the formal operationalization of the NGEU green target. Tagging has been adopted by the Recovery and Resilience Facility (EU Regulation 2021/241) for performance management, and adopted by Member States in their NRRPs, applying also to local projects. Following the tagging logic, any project fitting in those categories (i.e.: missions and components) that are identified as “green” by the NRRPs, is automatically considered to be positively contributing to the environmental target once it's accepted. Functionally, this means that once a project is accepted the environmental target is considered achieved a-priori. It's apparent how this system offers substantial room for manoeuvre to local actors regarding the actual integration of environmental elements inside the actions being funded. Specifically, this offers the opportunity to formally meet an integration condition

deflecting substantive integration with bureaucratic procedure. Quoting from the field:

“You know, an infrastructure must be sustainable, sure. So, I don’t want to say something trivial, I’m just speaking my mind. Sustainability can mean many things. The first thing coming to mind is environmental sustainability, but that is a concept that has been accepted independently from NGEU. I mean, it’s accepted as a given” (Genoa, Int. 13 – public administrator)

“We committed like having almost 40% that amount dedicated to investments that would support the climate transition. We call it the green tag. [...] So, this was one of the criteria that comes in the regulation. The second one is the DNSH, which is to do no significant harm. You know all the all the investments that are in within the plan they need to comply with this, and we need to ensure that it doesn't harm the environment. [...] all these investments, they have a green tag, so they compute positively to the climate transition. [...] And this is on the designing stage. So, we presented a set of investments. And then we need to ensure that at least 37% has green tagging. So, housing is an excellent example. There's this X amount and they contribute to the green tagging because every building needs to comply” (Int. 29, Lisbon – public administrator)

A third element is about the DNSH (*Do No Significant Harm*) principle, introduced with the European Green Deal and extended to NGEU. Already introduced in Chapter 1, the DNSH principle differs from the green tagging and qualifies as a “harder” regulatory instrument. Evidence shows, however, that the DNSH principle has largely remained confined to a rhetoric and programmatic dimension, as it lacks precise directives over practical implementation, remaining vague and ambiguous. Again, this ambiguity spans the leeway margin local actors have at their disposal. From the bottom-up perspective, municipal actors lack any reference on how to operationalize it. Thus, the principle remains unsubstantiated besides formal adherence (es.: declarations of conformity). From the top-down perspective, the lack of shared criteria for assessing the DNSH makes it nearly impossible to enforce, nor exert any control over the actions at the micro-level. As a result, the control over NGEU investments has focused mainly on expenditure, leaving actual environmental indicators largely overlooked. Both cases reflect this tendency, of local actors perceiving control from national and European institutions as a matter of financial review exclusively. No trace of controls over DNSH or

environmental indicators can be found. This further converges towards a wide room for discretion in how to define and implement environmental requirements, that translated into a lack of substantive integration. Quoting from the interviews:

“About the NRRP, in my opinion, a structure based on applications loses sight on the objective, on the “why”. You make applications on schools, sports, infrastructure, theatres, buildings. Those are applications. And on those you make declarations about the compliance to DNSH principles and outsource the control to external operators. I’d like to know if these things are then actually controlled. However, how can I say this, it’s complex to manage as an integrated tool to change urban planning, because the tool is cumbersome by design. It was made to be organic at the State level [...] but what has the State offered to local actors? Applications. But if I had to tell [...] how does it contribute to central targets, including to the green transition, I think nobody could calculate that.” (Int. 1, Genoa – Public administrator)

“Don't forget when you talk about funds whether it's in a neighbourhood, in a city, or in a Country, at the end of the day what counts in Brussels is if you spend the money. [...] to use it well, it takes a long time. So, at the end of the day what people are looking is the share of the money that we will spend. You cannot lose the money. It's quite incredible. You have a lot of pressure from the media [...]. But what is the main monitoring? If you were capable to use the financial resources or not. That's it.” (Int. 15, Lisbon – policy advisor)

“We set up an organizational effort for financial reporting. Let's not forget that the heaviest part of this work is financial administration. That is, financially reporting to the Ministries all the expenses and activities that have been done. [...] The effort required to Municipalities has not been done at the State level [...] we do the same job two times, three times [...]. But leaving criticisms aside, an important activity has been to set an office that tends to financial aspects.” (Int. 3, Genoa – public administrator)

Together, this evidence shows how, for municipal actors, the environmental conditions introduced by the EU are understood as mere procedural requirements. These are easily managed within usual policymaking patterns without the need to critically re-assess or re-design the policy options on the table.

The prevalence of budget maximisation objectives

A second pattern of events is the prevalence of money capture and budget maximisation objectives. Put bluntly, environmental integration is overruled by the competition over resources between municipal sectors. This pattern is portrayed in three strands of evidence of both substantive and procedural kind: the missing connection between NGEU projects and existing climate plans; the primary role of integrated climate plans as investment attractors; and the perception of fragmentation by actors in environmental departments (see Table 4.5 above).

The first two strands of evidence relate to municipal environmental and climate planning. Both municipalities have substantive tools dedicated to integrated climate and environmental planning which, however, do not enter in contact with NGEU investments. In both cases, I have inquired the municipal sectors entrusted with environmental and climate plans, respectively the “Energy Policy Direction” (*Direzione Politiche Energetiche*) and the Office for Coordination of the Sustainability and Transition Projects (*Coordinamento Processi di Sostenibilità e Transizione Ecologica*) in Genoa; and the Environment, Green Infrastructure, Climate and Energy Direction in Lisbon (*Direção Municipal do Ambiente, Estrutura Verde, Clima e Energia*).

Despite not being responsible for the implementation of NGEU projects (an aspect that will be further analysed below), the environmental sectors in the two municipalities have been active in the extensive production of local climate strategies and frameworks during the last decade. In both cities, the starting point for local climate action is the Covenant of Mayors, the main European climate city network. Already introduced in Chapter 1, the Covenant of Mayors is a European initiative involving local governments willing to contribute to EU climate and energy goals. Signatories voluntarily pledge to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase resilience to climate change, and promote sustainable energy sources. Launched in 2008 by the European Commission, signatories developed and implemented Sustainable Energy Action Plans (SEAPs) addressing climate change mitigation. At a later stage, the initiative has enlarged including also climate adaptation (introducing the SECAPs, Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans) aiming to exceed EU climate targets for 2030 and support the green transition.

The voluntary signature of the Covenant marked a starting point for the climate action in both Lisbon and Genoa, which led to an incremental evolution of climate

planning, and participation of both cities to other environmental and climate initiatives, often under (or linked to) the European framework the green transition. In the case of Lisbon, this evolution has been more dynamic, leading to the adoption of numerous initiatives and action plans, roughly one per year from 2008 to 2023.⁴⁰ The most recent, the Climate City Contract, was adopted in 2023 in the scope of the Net Zero Cities initiative for European Climate Neutrality. In the case of Genoa, the process has involved less initiatives but followed a similar path. Starting from the Covenant of Mayors SEAP in 2009, then updated to SECAP with climate adaptation in 2020, and then a new plan, “Genoa Lighthouse action plan” for “Genoa 2050”, in 2021. While not within a specific EU initiative, the plan explicitly engages with EU climate goals and aims build a framework for the urban agenda, integrating environmental, social, and economic development.

Overall, the municipal environmental planning initiatives in both cases follow the same basic scheme. They include a remarkable effort to: 1) identify the environmental vulnerabilities and potentials of the respective territory, 2) monitor mitigation and adaptation efforts within the municipal administration via a mix of qualitative and quantitative benchmark indicators, and 3) collect as many projects and actions as possible implemented by other municipal sectors, classify them based on their environmental contribution, and present a coherent narrative of municipal policymaking from a green-growth point of view.

On the one hand, these frameworks highlight the potential of these municipal sectors to develop and deploy integrative capacities for collecting and systematizing the existing policy actions under common frameworks built around environmental principles. In other words, there seems to be no lack of capacities to integrate environmental goals into substantive policy documents. On the other hand, these strategies didn't have tangible influence on NGEU projects design and implementation, despite it being a major window of opportunity for environmental action. The picture emerging from the interviews is that, despite the genuine ambition to influence the city's policy agenda, the municipal climate and environmental plans mainly serve two interrelated purposes: 1) externally, to project the image of sustainable cities for the attraction of capitals and investments; and 2) internally, to bolster the budget of municipal sectors (the environmental ones) that remain chronically underfunded from the main city budget. In essence, empirical data suggests that, despite the shared goal of integrating environmental action in municipal policymaking, NGEU projects and climate frameworks

⁴⁰ Source <https://netzerocities.app/resource-4423>

remained separated, with evidence pointing towards the lack of substantive integration.

“In theory, the SECAP [Covenant of Majors, ed.] should be a planning tool for mitigation. In reality, it becomes more of a tool for systematization. I mean, what it does is collecting all the things being done and all the contributions. We never found ourselves in a situation where [...] we had no projects. [...] I mean, what we need is money. [...] And in any case, the SECAP itself is something that layers on top of EU and national goals for CO2 emissions. [...] It’s more of a symbolic project, in my opinion.” (Int. 2, Genoa – public administrator)

“It [the integrated plan, ed.] has been essential to gain resources from the Bank of the European Council, which were given to the municipality [...]. Then more, because we have operationalized it in the action plan [...]. This is a governance tool, a tool that the mayor can carry around, a tool also for marketing, because this is the city of tomorrow, where life can be enjoyed.” (Int. 1, Genoa – Public administrator)

“This is the strategy given by “net zero cities” to create the Climate City Contract. The 3 components of the master plan, one related to commitments, one to investment, and one for action. To make action we need money. [...] Because the Climate City Contract is not for the municipality, the point of view is different [...]. Increasing the budget with both private and public [...]. We need to know what’s happening in the world and attract them to do it with us. And that’s not a big problem because we have several investors wanting to invest in the city [...]. I think the Climate City Contract [...] gives you a picture based on the environment, but if you ask other people from other areas, they will highlight the importance of other dimensions.” (Int. 21, Lisbon – Public administrator)

This lack of substantive integration between existing climate strategies and NGEU projects combines with procedural evidence. We have seen that through the interviews that the scarcity of funds is an issue perceived within environmental sectors. This makes the lack of participation in NGEU investments particularly relevant, given the strong environmental narrative (and conditions) that NGEU carries. In dealing with this issue, the focus of the discourse moves from the thematic content of investments to the distribution of resources per-se. In the

interviews, words like *money, investors, funding, resources, privates, etc.* are central. Officials seem to identify an important part of their work in the attraction of resources from outside the municipal budget. In the quotes below, the arguments of the interviewees could be summarized as “we didn’t participate to NGEU *because we didn’t share those resources*”. Budget, thus, is not a tool to implement thematic priorities. Budget *is* a priority in itself, and the choices over budget distribution define if and how cooperation happens. I believe this to be crucial. It reflects the centrality of financial resources in tracing the boundaries between sectors:

“In term of that question I don’t have an answer. The NRRP at the municipal level depends on other departments. Some plans of the city are being funded with the Recovery and Resilience Plan. So, at the environment department we don’t have connection with that type of funds [...]. Here, we are responsible for the energy, noise, water, air quality, biodiversity and climate dimension. So, in terms of the direct relationship between master plan, NRRP funds, and our work in the municipality, we have no connection. Because our budget is low if compared to that. We have other types of funds to make things possible to do, European projects [...] and other type of funds. [...] This is the difference.” (Int. 21, Lisbon – Public administrator)

“It was a problem before, but now not anymore, the money. Now the problems are projects, that’s the focus: the projects. All things considered, I think the NRRP is incredibly simple, if compared to our frameworks which we had to create, and implement. About the NRRP I don’t have anything to decide. It’s on someone else.” (Int. 1, Genoa – public administrator)

“Well, I did very little about the NRRP. [...] About the NRRP there is this national discourse, a lot of money came and, from the ministerial level to the smallest municipality, they said “open the drawers and get the projects out”, there is no planning. I have very little to do with the NRRP, all my projects [...] are done with public-private partnerships” (Int. 2, Genoa – public administrator)

I believe the recurrence of the “money” theme to be a clear signal of an underlying competition between sectors over the distribution of resources. It hints at deeper dynamics centred around *money* as a positional asset within the

administrative organization. The existence of internal competition for funding is not particularly surprising per-se, as it's expected to happen in most organizations. What's interesting to notice is the relationship between resources and sectoral boundaries. Resources are central because they represent a priority for actors, as well as a source of legitimacy in "marking the territory" between sectors, even when the thematic issue is interdependent.

The lack of inter-sectoral cooperation activities

The third pattern of events is the lack of inter-sectoral cooperation agreements or practices. Two kinds of procedural evidence support it: the lack of reciprocal interaction between the sectors in charge of NGEU resources and the environmental counterparts; and the tendency of the former to intend coordination as a problem "internal" to the sectoral boundaries, rather than "cross-cutting" (see Table 4.5 above).

About the first kind of evidence, much transpires from the empirical material that has already been presented above. On the side of the environmental sectors, we have seen that in both municipalities actors explicitly deny any systematic participation in activities regarding NGEU investments. These include also coordination actions, from simple meetings to structured agreements. This does not allow us to hold that no form of interaction exists between different sectors. However, we can say with confidence that *systematic* and/or repeated interaction didn't take place in the scope of NGEU implementation. This has been confirmed in the quotes above, in passages such as "*I have very little to do with the NRRP*" or "*In terms of the direct relationship between master plan, NRRP funds, and our work in the municipality, we have no connection*". In those same quotes the discourse clearly focuses on marking the distinction between "what we do versus what they do". This difference between *us* and *them* is a clear indicator of procedural fragmentation. This confirms the absence of cooperation activities related to NGEU projects between the sectors in charge of the investments and their environmental counterparts.

The second strand of evidence comes from the interviews with the sectors directly in charge of NGEU investments. Talking to them, my attempts to inquire the issue of intersectoral cooperation was always interpreted "internally" by interviewees. Here, environmental sectors are not even mentioned during interviews, confirming the absence of systematic relations between sectors. Conversely, the interviews portray a diffused tendency to intend cooperation as the

process of managing the different offices and agencies *within* a bounded thematic sector, although with slight variations in the manifestation of this aspect in the two cases. I will present these below.

In Genoa, this took the form of prioritizing cooperation between the Smart Mobility Direction and the Project Management Office (PMO). Given the peculiar dynamics of Genoese developmental agenda characterized by an abundance of infrastructural projects, the former administration passed a municipal reform introducing the figure of the Project Manager (PM). Following a New Public Management approach modelled on private-sector practices, each strategic project, including the NGEU mobility initiatives, has been assigned to a dedicated project manager. Appointed by the executive and bound to the administration in a spoils-system fashion, the task of the PMs is to guide the implementation of one or more projects and coordinate the various actors involved in the implementation phase. The PM reform responds to the need to increase political control over strategic projects and reduce times of implementation. Although introduced previously to NGEU, the PMO represented a ready-made solution to address the strict timeline of NGEU (especially the 2026 deadline). However, the structure found itself layered on top of the existing administrative structure, increasing the fragmentation of local policies into individual projects. While the official goal was to span across sectoral boundaries, PMs found their actual task was micro-managing projects. In other words, instead of favouring coordination, municipal policymaking further fragmented into sub-units at the micro-level.

"The Project Management Structure is the one crossing the competences. If you looked at a typical municipal organization chart, you would have seen all the sectors, offices, and tasks [...] The mechanisms that are often criticized as "bureaucracy", in reality also come from this organization, where my objective does not coincide with the one from my colleague directing another structure. Now the projects are ruling. [...] Also because such a huge amount of money could not be managed by the same people. So, also for this reason, we had to decide what to keep in our belly" (Int. 3, Genoa – public administrator)

"When these projects came, the mayor wanted to introduce the PMs, which were not common in a municipal administration [...]. They were basically all from private companies [...]. This brought some advantages, like the reduction of times and more speed due to their background. And also, some disadvantages. They didn't know the public sector initially.

Coming from the private, some things are different. [...] one element to which we had to put effort is integrating the people inside with people coming from outside. <Do these people think they're coming here to teach us?> In the end, 5 Years have passed, and things are going well [...] But sometimes we have a billion things to do. It can happen that a project passes in front of another" (Int. 5, Genoa – Public administrator)

"This is one of the limitations of a matrix organization, where it's the skill of those who propose and follow their own project and create synergies, that becomes the oil in the machine. Because, even if cogs are perfect, there is an issue of lubrication and friction. So, a PM structure, in my opinion, should not assume the project could live on its own, because it needs everyone. But not everyone necessarily agrees with your project, because it's not theirs. [...] there is also a little share of jealousy of everyone within their direction saying "well, they're not working on something strictly linked with mine". [...] I believe these activities are the most complex. Because they need strategic vision, but also daily micro-management. The lucky part is that the PMs that follow these projects are wonderful, skilled people. But they must have a kind of "project strabismus". A multiple focus, they need to monitor the individual shovel [...] but they can't lose sight on the deadline" (Int. 12, Genoa – public administrator)

In Lisbon, "internal" cooperation within the housing sector didn't have to face internal reforms like in Genoa but was equally challenged by the addition of a multiple vertical and horizontal dimensions of coordination. The offices within the municipal housing sector include the Cabinet of the Housing councillor (overseeing the whole NGEU housing projects), and the two municipal directions of Housing (DMHDL)⁴¹, and Conservation (DMMC)⁴². To the coordination of these directly within the municipal authority, horizontal coordination extended to other key local agencies such as the Society for Urban Rehabilitation (SRU)⁴³ (managing the new construction of big housing complexes), and the municipal company GERBALIS⁴⁴, (managing the social housing stock). Vertically all these agencies had to interact with the National Institute for Public Housing (IHRU, *Instituto da Habitação e da Reabilitação Urbana*), which has been trusted by the central government with

⁴¹ Direção Municipal de Habitação e Desenvolvimento Local

⁴² Direção Municipal de Manutenção e Conservação

⁴³ Sociedade de Reabilitação Urbana

⁴⁴ Gestão do Arrendamento da Habitação Municipal de Lisboa

financial intermediation, specifically as distribution hub for NGEU funds dedicated to the housing component. The necessity to coordinate between these agencies, vertically and horizontally, incentivized municipal actors to exclude any coordination partner that was not essential to implementation (i.e.: environmental sectors). All coordination efforts thus remained constrained within the boundaries of the already crowded housing sector. Again, given the strict deadlines imposed by NGEU, widening the scope of cooperation was perceived as impracticable, if not counterproductive.

“We made like 150 candidacies and IHRU started to check. And only approved, at this moment, less than 50% of these [...]. So, it's a long process. [...] Everything must be exact and perfectly fine, otherwise they don't approve anything. All the contract process must be perfect, otherwise they will not accept, so this is quite challenging not only for us, but to all the organizations implicated in all this. [...] Inside the municipality, I think at the beginning it was quite difficult. Now we are organized we have a lot of contacts; there is a team dedicated to it [...] our biggest problem, the communication with IHRU [...]. Every week we have new rules, and I have to go talk to all my colleagues and the companies that work with us. It's quite difficult (Int. 24, Lisbon – public administrator)

“She is like Ronaldo in this game. Because she has to link IHRU, the families, the organizations that manage the families, the ones that build the houses, the DMMC and SRU, and also Gerbalis (Int. 18, Lisbon – public administrator)”

“In my point of view, we have a big incoherence in this process because in Europe, we always want to achieve something impossible. Use this money rapid but with a strategic approach. Do we want rapid, or strategic? If you want rapid, do like the Americans: send the check in the mail, send this amount of dollars. If you want strategic, you cannot expect something strategic in this short period of time. So, we always live with this contradiction (Int. 15, Lisbon – policy advisor)

The evidence highlights that the cooperation between actors pertaining to the same sector was reinforced with NGEU, while the issue of cooperation with other sectors (i.e.: climate and/or environmental departments) wasn't stimulated, nor was it considered feasible during the implementation of NGEU investments.

4.4. Three emergent mechanisms discouraging integration

In the previous paragraph answered the first research question showing that, overall, NGEU did not constitute a stimulus to integrate municipal environmental and climate policy with other sectors of local policymaking. This paragraph is dedicated to completing the picture and answering the second question “*which mechanisms explain the presence (or absence) of such integration dynamics?*”. In this section, I will present three emergent mechanisms explaining the lack of stimulus to integration found in both cases. Each mechanism is developed starting from the patterns of events presented previously in Table 4.5. The mechanisms – *tokenism*, *budgeting*, and *displacement* – are summarized in Table 4.6 and individually presented below.

Table 4.6 – Mechanisms discouraging policy integration in Genoa and Lisbon

Mechanism	Description	Causal direction	Actors' rationale
Tokenism (see Figure 4.4)	Public administrations are routinary and resourceful. They will use norms strategically and meet integration conditions with nominal contributions	Structure-to-agents	Legitimacy (behaviour is justified through norms)
Budgeting (see Figure 4.5)	Public administrations are budget maximisers. They will maximise their stake and minimize the occasions to share budget with others	Structure-to-agents	Material power (behaviour is justified through resources)
Displacement (see Figure 4.6)	Public administrations are simplifiers. They will take the fastest way to do the job, and dismiss any cooperation which is not strictly necessary	Structure-to-agents	Functional efficiency (behaviour is justified through necessity)

Source: Author's own elaboration

The key challenge of this point of the research is conceptualizing the patterns of events describe above into mechanisms. Giving them a name, describing how they unfold, and ground them in the methodological framework I presented in Table 3.3. To guide this process of analysis and interpretation, I have drawn from Eugene Bardach's seminal work on *implementation games* (Bardach, 1977). Under all practical and conceptual aspects, Bardach's games are *mechanisms*, as they “characterize in a moderately abstract and systematic way the interactions that routinely link the different kinds of institutions or roles normally involved in a process” (Bardach, 1977, p. 55). Implementation is a “system of games”, where a game is “a master metaphor that direct attention and stimulates insight” and a

system is a “collection of structural elements related to one another through ongoing processes”. Implementation games thus fit all the key characters of realist causal mechanisms I identified in the methodological chapter, as they are *abstract, tendential (portable/non-deterministic)*, and describe a (*causal*) *process* at the interaction of *structures* and *agents*.

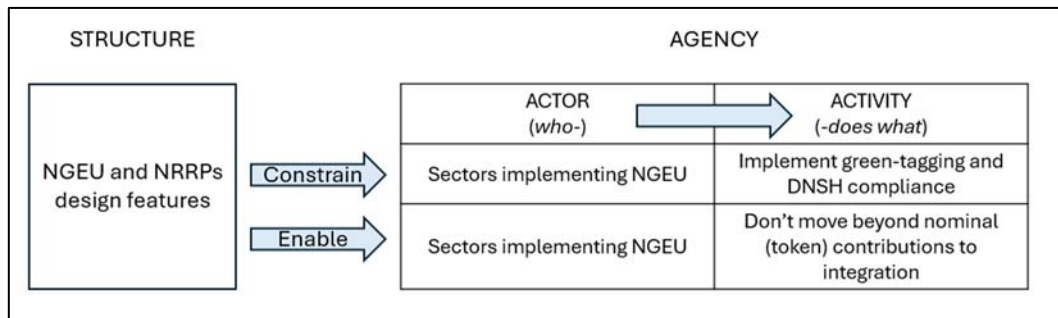
Tokenism: reproducing fragmentation through norms

Tokenism “involves an attempt to appear to be contributing to a program element publicly while privately conceding only a small (“token”) contribution (Bardach, 1977, p. 98)”. Following this concise definition, we get a representation of a typical causal dynamic in policy implementation where actors comply with top-down policy tasks crafting solutions that only require nominal contributions to the policy problem. In other words, especially to achieve tasks that are outside their routine practice, public offices tend to minimize effort and prioritize formal compliance over the achievement of challenging policy goals. This is often pursued through solutions that achieve bare-minimum compliance to the formal programme requirements.

In the two cases of Genoa and Lisbon, tokenism describes the tendency by the actors responsible of NGEU projects to limit the integration of environmental goals to green tagging and compliance to DNSH regulations. It’s the mechanism explaining the first pattern of events discussed in Paragraph 4.3. Of course, this nominal contribution wasn’t the only way to deal with environmental requirements. For examples, municipalities could have supported stronger procedural, or substantive integration between sectors. But, as we’ve seen, these alternatives were not formally necessary, leading municipalities to opt for the easiest course of action, tokenism.

Tokenism thus applies to policy integration when the substantive dimension of the integrated policy tools (i.e.: the policy design) doesn’t offer an adequate system of norms to translate policy integration into practice. On the contrary, when the conditions leave a margin of discretion that allow actors to keep the status-quo, this is to be expected. It implies a strategic use of rules and norms (i.e.: a “legitimacy rationale”) to reach the appointed task, but on the implementers’ own terms.

Figure 4.4 – Tokenism causal mechanism



Source: author's own elaboration

Based on the framework from Bennett and Mishkin (2022) presented in the methodological chapter (Table 3.3), tokenism in the two cases takes the shape of a structure-to-agent mechanism following a legitimacy rationale (Figure 4.4).

Structure-to-agent because the actors' behaviour is strongly influenced by the institutional boundaries imposed by NGEU design, then reproduced in the NRRPs. As we have seen, local actors must find a balance between the *need* to comply with conditionality and DNSH (constraints) and the *chance* to interpret these requests in a "soft" way (enablement). Overall, this condition leaves a fairly large range of manoeuvre to local actors in deploying token contributions to environmental requirements imposed from the top-down. The de-facto absence of any top-down control focused on local environmental indicators, and the exclusive focus on financial monitoring by national and EU institutions (i.e.: expenditure control), further justify the adoption of tokenism. Tokenism also offers the actors a chance to save effort to spend on other tasks. For them, there is no incentive in interpreting the norms in a way different than tokenism. Conversely, the legal framework of NGEU offers the structural conditions to rule out any stronger effort towards policy integration.

Budgeting: reproducing fragmentation through resources

Budgeting is the causal mechanism making sectors of public administrations "budget maximisers. They, therefore, do what they can to win the favour in the eyes of officials in the legislature" and "secure not only money but flexibility in regard to its use. The recipient bureau seeks to maximise the size of its grant while minimizing the constraints on how it must spend" (Bardach, 1977, pp. 71–72). In the budgeting game we have the conceptualization of economic resources not only as the tool to achieve substantive policy objectives but also as a proxy for political competition between entrenched sectors and offices. In terms of policy integration,

the mandate to coordinate between different sectors also coincides with the necessity to share the budget or, at the very least, involve other actors in the choices to allocate it. From this perspective, policy integration takes the shape of a constraint on budget management, making it less appealing to the actors involved.

In the analysis, this mechanism emerges from the pattern of events showing how actors put a central focus on resources and budget distribution (see Table 4.5). We have seen, in fact, how resources play a central role in causing a lack of substantive and procedural integration between different policy sectors.

In both cases path dependence emerges as a strong contextual dynamic influencing the budget distribution and, consequently, policy integration. In other words, in both Genoa and Lisbon path dependence is a structural condition for the activation of a budgeting mechanism.

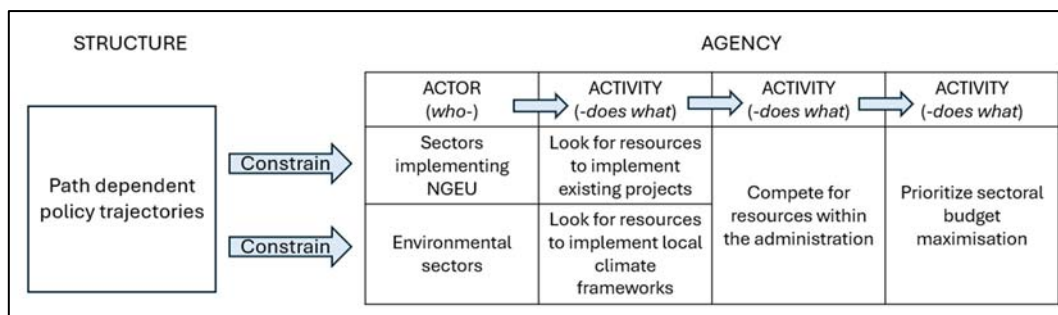
On the side of the municipal sectors in charge of NGEU investments, the allocation of resources is dependent on policy legacies (self-reinforcing in Genoa and reactive in Lisbon). Money goes where it matters to decisionmakers. On the side of the environmental sectors, the attention is drawn to finding external sources of funding to compensate for their chronic under-budgeting. Perhaps more strikingly, for both sides policy integration is overruled by the fragmentation of budgets. The possible thematic overlaps in the policy content (i.e.: the environmental conditions imposed by NGEU) are not a primary concern when resources are allocated separately.

Money is the name of the game, leading to a condition of inter-sectoral competition “below the radar”. Hardly perceivable from the surface, and expertly curtailed by administrative procedures, the budgeting mechanism discourages practices of integration and encourages sectoral entrenchment. Quoting from an interview:

“Europe plays the role of a very nasty parent, because it says: <have this money, buy a car. But it needs to be bought today>. You reply: <hold on, I don’t even have a driving license!>. <Your problem. Solve your issues. After today the money goes to your sister>. Do you see what I mean? If you think about it from a policy perspective, the conflicts are just so obvious. It becomes less about strategic implementation, and more about managing opportunity. (Int. 28, Lisbon – scholar)

Based on the framework presented in Table 3.3, budgeting is a structure-to-agent mechanism following a “material power” rationale (Figure 4.5). Actors’ behaviour is grounded in resources (i.e.: material power). At the same time, the distribution of such resources is heavily influenced by path dependent policy legacies (the “structural” element). Budgeting thus strengthens the boundaries between sectors. Since every sector needs the resources to implement their own actions, there is no incentive to share them through substantive or procedural integration. On the contrary, all sectors involved need to increment their share of resources to maintain (or fortify) their position and influence within the municipal agenda.

Figure 4.5 – Budgeting causal mechanism



Source: author’s own elaboration

Displacement: reproducing fragmentation trough necessity

Lastly, *displacement* is the causal mechanism explaining how public administrations are generally willing to expand their “territory”, meaning to span across wider or different domains of action, “but this desire normally evaporates as soon as the bureau recognizes that the program will impose a heavy work load or that it will take the bureau into realms of controversy or that the required tasks are so difficult that it lacks the capacity to do the job. If the programme is that unattractive, a bureau may try to shift certain of the operating responsibilities” (Bardach, 1977, p. 159). In this typical implementation dynamic, originally labelled “Not our problem” by Bardach, we find another key for the interpretation of various empirical elements collected.

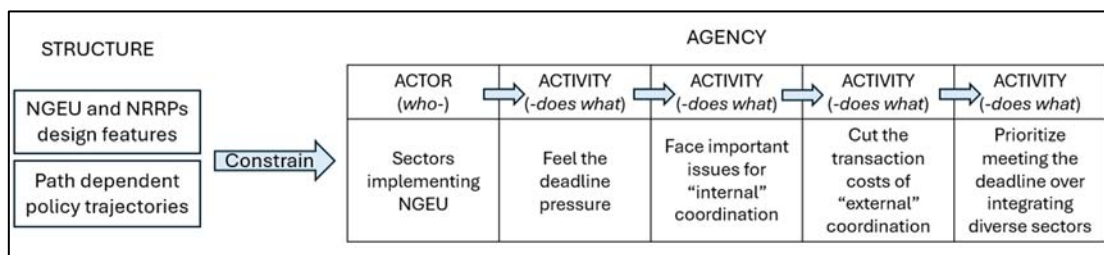
In the two cases, this mechanism explains the causal process by which the issue of integrating climate policy and economic development loses its centrality in the passage from EU discourse to local practice. Locally, the priority towards environmental action is displaced in favour of other pressing matters. Specifically,

the primary operational concern becomes funding as many pre-existing projects as possible in time for the 2026 deadline.

With slight variations in empirical accounts, the analysis has shown that contexts focus their coordination efforts on speeding implementation and making the process more efficient. This sets aside boundary-spanning integration and emphasizes “internal” coordination, *within* the sectors. In Genoa, this takes the shape of breaking-up mobility policy into micro units to be handed singular Project Management Offices. In Lisbon, this takes the shape of a race against the deadline to coordinate a universe of housing offices and agencies horizontally and vertically.

Both processes display a process of displacement of the European Green Deal goals, meaning the priority to integrate climate targets into the economic recovery loses its grip and fades in the background. Results show that, eventually, administrative fragmentation between sectors is reproduced in the absence of actual instances of collaboration between sectors.

Figure 4.6 – Displacement causal mechanism



Source: author’s own elaboration

Like tokenism and budgeting, displacement is a structure-to-agent mechanism. However, with slightly more complexity, its structural foundations are found in both the design of the programme, and path dependence (Figure 4.6). Path dependence defines the default option for territorial investment. Not only it represents the most urgent priorities for territorial investment but also offers solutions that policymakers have been working on for some time. At the same time, NGEU design (and especially its strict deadline in 2026) constraints the opportunity to bring substantial change in the municipal agendas and reinforces the appeal of ready-made interventions.

*“Pay attention to the fine print, it's far more
important than the selling price”*
- Frank Underwood, *House of Cards*, Chapter 16

Chapter 5

Lessons learned: insights for policy theory and practice

In this closing chapter, I will connect the empirical analysis with elements from policy integration theory (Chapter 2) and the research problem (Chapter 1). The aim is to explore how the empirical elements can link to theoretical and practical concerns, appealing to a broader audience and contributing to the scientific debate. First, I will use the framework of processual comparison presented in Chapter 3 (see Table 3.6) to present a series of key exploratory propositions that can be drawn from the empirical results. Specifically, I will discuss how comparing the two cases across the three different axes of comparison – horizontal, vertical, and transversal – has allowed the discovery of relevant insights that emerge either from similarities or differences between the cases (Table 5.1). Second, I present a series of pragmatic insights addressing the suggestions that emerge from the research, that could improve local environmental integration in programmes similar to NGEU (Table 5.2)

5.1. Theoretical insights about policy integration

In relation to the theoretical literature on policy integration, this monograph provides several relevant theoretical contributions stemming from the empirical analysis. As discussed in Chapter 2, the field of policy integration continues to be characterized by a diversity of definitions, approaches, and interpretations (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010; Tosun & Lang, 2017). This diversity has kept the debate vibrant, but it has also produced considerable fragmentation regarding what

phenomena constitute policy integration, how they are conceptualized, and how they should be inquired. Against this backdrop, the evidence presented in this work has allowed to engage with one of the central gaps in the literature.

Table 5.1 – Theoretical elements and propositions emerging from the comparison

Element	Axis of comparison	Emerges from	Abductive proposition
Competing integration rationales	Horizontal	Similarity	Actors' choices to converge with (or diverge from) an integrated policy design depends on multiple competing rationales
Budgetary fragmentation	Horizontal	Similarity	The distribution of economic resources to policy sectors is not politically neutral. It reproduces fragmentation by means of inter-sectoral competition for centrality and prestige.
Joint action inefficiencies	Horizontal	Similarity	Joint action problems encountered during implementation contrast the increase in efficiency pursued with integrated policy designs
Institutional fragmentation	Vertical	Difference	Integration is further discouraged when vertical rules and institutions layer on top of horizontal fragmentation
	Transversal	Partial similarity	integration is less likely to be achieved when path dependencies strongly incentivise unilateral action on narrow sectoral policies.

Source: author's own elaboration

Chapter 2, in fact, identifies the *implementation gap* as a central issue in policy integration debate, split between the policy design orientation and its critics. The first contribution that this study gives to this debate is portraying the implementation gap in a paradigmatic way. In Genoa and Lisbon, an integrated policy design imposed from the top-down has been layered by local implementers on existing local policy patterns. Both cases converge on the scenario of “imperfect implementation” that has been sketched in the research design. From this result, it's possible to advance key propositions linked to aspects of implementation theory that usually evade the debate on policy integration (Table 5.1). Trough the analysis, I hold that these aspects assume key importance to understand processes of policy integration, despite being largely overlooked in core studies.

Against this background, to understand policy integration and its failures the analysis suggests enlarging the focus of inquiry from the topic of policy capacities – ubiquitous in mainstream literature (Jordan & Schout, 2006; J. Rayner & Howlett, 2009; Howlett et al., 2017; Domorenok et al., 2021; Bazzan et al., 2023; Cejudo & Trein, 2023a; Dorado-Rubín et al., 2025) – to the “nitty-gritty” of implementation processes. Further developing this perspective, below I present the

five propositions highlighting specific, detailed aspects of theoretical relevance (Table 5.1).

The competing rationales in integration processes

A first proposition is about the existence of *competing integration rationales*. I have introduced in Chapter 2 how rationales constitute a key element in the debate around policy integration, although not fully developed. It has been shown how the debate is split between a “functionalist” approach, and some “processual” critiques. The former focuses on policy integration as a matter of increasing efficiency in the policy process, de-facto assuming policy sectors as primarily functional distinctions of tasks (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010; Howlett et al., 2017; Tosun & Lang, 2017; Vince et al., 2024; Dorado-Rubín et al., 2025). Conversely, the latter point the attention towards the political nature of integration processes (Winkel & Sotirov, 2016; Allmendinger, 2017; Cavaco et al., 2023; Cejudo & Trein, 2023b; Bannink et al., 2024). The comparison between the cases of Genoa and Lisbon allows to put forward relevant nuances to this debate, bridging policy integration with implementation literature.

The coexistence of multiple rationales emerges from the comparison on the horizontal axis: contrasting the analysis of the two cases, the evidence points towards common rationales followed by actors across both municipalities. Specifically, I identify that actors involved in integration processes follow not one, but three rationales. These are equally found in both municipalities, and are respectively the *normative*, *material power*, and *functional*. This leads to my first proposition: *the actors' choices to converge with (or diverge from) an integrated policy design depends on multiple competing rationales*.

The main contribution that this proposition offers to policy integration theory is to argue for a wider approach to the field of study. Existing integration theory has largely overlooked the “normative” and “material power” rationales especially. At the same time, the perspective on the “functional effectiveness” logic found in policy integration literature is often narrow and normative (i.e.: more integration equates to more efficiency), a criticism already raised by Knill (2020).

This analysis offers new insights about *which* kind of rationale can be at play and *how* it can be deployed. An interesting connection can be traced with the literature on defensive regulation (Bardach & Kagan, 1982), in the form of a strategic deployment of the normative rationale to deflect integrative efforts. This

particularly hints at the “normative” logic and the mechanism of tokenism, while the other two logics will be at the centre of the next propositions.

In general, the issue of actors’ rationales resonates heavily with seminal works on policy implementation such as Hjern and Porter’s “implementation structures” (1981). Central in the implementation structures framework, a “programme rationale” and a “organization rationale” must coincide to deliver coherent implementation. This analysis shows that this proposition holds true also in the case of policy integration: implementation drifts happen when rationales don’t converge. While mainstream literature focuses exclusively on the “programme rationale” of integrated policy designs, I argue that more attention should be paid to the rationales of the actors involved.

Integration versus budget distribution

The second proposition is grounded in the empirically described budgeting mechanisms and advances the theoretical element of *budgetary fragmentation*. It holds that: *the distribution of economic resources to policy sectors is not politically neutral. It reproduces fragmentation by means of inter-sectoral competition for centrality and prestige.*

This proposition stems from the similarities between Genoa and Lisbon in a horizontal comparison. In both cases, in fact, we notice the centrality of economic resources in the definition of sectoral boundaries. Here, it clearly emerges how money plays the role of a positional asset within administration. This element is often overlooked in policy integration literature but is clearly central in the empirical data above. Mainstream “functionalist” approaches to policy integration scarcely problematize the distribution of resources between fragmented policy sectors. Fragmented budgets are usually considered to be a consequence of fragmentation, rather than a cause. This research shows cases in which the opposite happens, meaning that the distribution of resources can also represent a *cause* of fragmentation. Linking to the literature quoted at the end of Chapter 1, this dynamic is coherent with Niskanen’s (1968, 1994) work on the economics of bureaucracy. Niskanen’s work paints the economic behaviour of public officials as budget-maximisation, as opposed to the profit-orientation of market operators. It also considers administrative sectors as an environment characterised by the competition over budget maximization, leading to a monopolistic approach to public policy implementation.

A sector receiving a budget will thus draw legitimacy (and prestige) to act on an issue and won't be inclined to share its resources or position. Other sectors potentially connected on the thematic side (i.e.: inter-dependent sectors) will also behave *as-if* the budget allocation marked a clear boundary, avoiding interfering. This is exactly what we observe in Genoa and Lisbon. Policy integration literature would thus benefit from adopting a more critical perspective on budgets, treating resources (economic especially) as a primary cause of fragmentation and protection of sectoral interests.

When fragmenting is more efficient than integrating

The third proposition about *joint action inefficiencies* relates to the functional efficiency rationale and is grounded in the displacement mechanism. It holds that: *joint action problems encountered during implementation contrast the increase in efficiency pursued with integrated policy designs*. Like the previous, the proposition emerges from a horizontal comparison between cases that highlights similarities between the two. The most interesting aspect of this comparison is that in the analysis above the efficiency rationale is not a driver for integration but rather encourages actors to reproduce fragmentation. This is contrary to the assumption of mainstream integration literature, which typically views policy integration as a desired outcome by virtue of its increased effectiveness in handling cross-cutting problems.

The use of the expression “joint action” traces an obvious link between this proposition and the work of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), as the tendency of implementation to get more uncertain as actors, levels of government, and decisions add to the process. This dynamic can be observed in the analysis of Genoa and Lisbon in the displacement mechanism. Minimizing integrative efforts favours the avoidance of “joint action” problems that would put the implementation of the programme at risk (i.e.: missing the deadline). Integration literature seems to largely overlook the fact that policy integration, by definition, implies joint action problems. This because it's based on augmenting the interconnections between actors, organizations, and policy instruments. Consequently, while integrated policy designs might look more efficient “on paper” few have noticed their risk of losing efficiency in practice. While some have noted this tendency towards complexity traps (Metz et al., 2020; Bolognesi et al., 2021; Dorado-Rubín et al., 2025), this research nuances this argument showing that – from the point of view of implementers – fragmenting can be more functionally efficient than integrating.

Mixing the vertical with the horizontal

The fourth and fifth propositions can be grouped under the common element of *institutional fragmentation* and emerge from different comparative points of view. The fourth proposition holds that: *integration is further discouraged when vertical rules and institutions layer on top of horizontal fragmentation*.

It emerges from differences found in vertical comparison. The most glaring element here is the different kinds of challenges faced by Lisbon in managing the “internal” coordination between offices of the same sector, compared to the same task in Genoa. Within the displacement mechanism, I have described both cases sharing the tendency to prioritize “internal” coordination over the cross-sectoral. Both cases also share a variety of actors to coordinate horizontally at the municipal scale. The two cases, however, differ in one element that adds a further degree of complexity in Lisbon. This is represented by the presence of a State-level actor holding a gatekeeping role over investments⁴⁵. This is not found in Genoa, where the implementation develops mostly at the local level horizontally. As a result, in the case of Lisbon time pressure was felt stronger, further discouraging integrative attempts. In other words, the fragmentation between policy sectors at the horizontal level can be exacerbated by vertical institutional differences.

Similar dynamics hint to the role of *polity* in implementing integrated policy designs (Sager & Gofen, 2022). Institutional arrangements can exist beyond the control of actors involved in the implementation of a programme. Vertical ties and hierarchical structures can create disparities in the distribution of powers between the actors involved. Other than few studies (Winkel & Sotirov, 2016; Bannink et al., 2024), mainstream policy integration literature generally lacks problematization of similar institutional aspects. This is crucial because structures – as well as the power asymmetries they create – constrain the ways implementers behave and restrict their choice environment (see also Steinbacher, 2025).

Back to the future: legacies and path dependence

The fifth proposition emerges from partial similarities found in the transversal comparison of the cases. It focuses on the longer-period historical developments that precede the specific programme implementation, but that affect how it develops in the two cases. The proposition holds that: *integration is less likely to be achieved*

⁴⁵ The IHRU, *Instituto da Habitação e da Reabilitação Urbana*

when path dependencies strongly incentivise unilateral action on narrow sectoral policies.

I refer here specifically to the shared centrality of path dependencies observed in both cases. I speak of “partial similarities” to underline the nuanced distinctions between the two kinds of path dependence, self-reinforcing in Genoa and reactive in Lisbon. Again, this highlights a missing piece of discussion in policy integration literature, that are institutionalized policy legacies (Nesti & Graziano, 2025). As introduced in Chapter 2, policy integration entails a form of change in policymaking. However, this dimensions of change implied in integrated policy designs might conflict with strong institutional pressures for the status-quo such as path dependent policy patterns. When path dependence supports heavily sectoral policies, as in the cases analysed, this puts further strain on attempts to integrate these dominant sectors with others which are less central in the agenda. This friction during implementation translates in the tendency to maintain the status-quo, or introducing token contributions that fulfil integration on paper, but reproduce fragmentation in practice.

5.2. Pragmatic insights about the research problem

In this section I will discuss a series of pragmatic insights that link the empirical analysis to the research problem of Chapter 1, summarized in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 - Pragmatic insights drawn from empirical analysis

Insights		Description
1	Local issues prevalence	Local actors tend to prioritize “immediate” local policy goals over “distant” international climate commitments
2	NGEU missing incentives	NGEU design at the national and international levels did not offer effective incentives to foster environmental action locally
2A	Sinergies	Existing EU environmental planning initiatives involving municipalities could be better linked to funding programmes like NGEU. Rewarding the expenditure linked to such environmental initiatives could incentivise stronger environmental investments
2B	Participation	Open and transparent participatory or deliberative processes at the local stage could help breaking sectoral logics and stimulate novel, creative solutions for environmental integration.
2C	Evaluation	The RRF performance management system (milestones and targets) has mostly incentivised money expenditure over policy contents. A stronger and more content-oriented evaluation structure (e.g.: EU structural funds) could stimulate stronger adherence to environmental goals

Source: author’s own elaboration

Small scale, big impact

About environmental policymaking, the cases of Genoa and Lisbon portray a clear picture of how climate goals that are central at the international level, gradually lose centrality as we move the observation point towards smaller geographical scales. As shown in Chapter 1, there is a long-standing debate surrounding climate change (CC) and sustainable development (SD), (see S. Cohen et al., 1998; J. B. Robinson & Herbert, 2001; J. Robinson et al., 2006; Maggs et al., 2025). As presented, this debate is structured around two distinct perspectives, which cross fertilized over time but still maintain some points of friction. On the one hand, the CC approach emphasizes the centrality of mitigating CO₂ emissions as the principal objective of climate policy, with other actions (i.e.: adaptation) as a support. On the other hand, SD approaches underline importance of balancing climate goals with equally important social and environmental counterparts (Meadows et al., 1972; Bulkeley & Betsill, 2013; Bulkeley, 2021; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Parrique, 2022; Hirvilammi et al., 2023). These approaches also highlight the importance of the local scales, arguing that climate action is inherently place-based (Bizikova et al., 2007, 2010).

In relation to these two perspectives, this research supports the place-based arguments on sustainable development and environmental policy. The empirical evidence, in fact, shows how the implementation of supranational climate goals is always mediated by place-based contextual dynamics. The cases of NGEU implementation in Genoa and Lisbon illustrate this dynamic particularly well. Although climate objectives were positioned centrally to EU discourse and linked to the regulatory framework of the instrument, the findings reveal that their salience diminishes as the as the implementation chain furthers from the EU. Local actors, confronted with immediate place-based problems and path dependent courses of policymaking, reshape or dilute EU climate commitments that become secondary. Finding a compromise between all the players involved in the multi-level governance of climate and environmental policy is not an easy task, and much has been said about it over decades of academic production and activism.

Pragmatically, the analysis above reminds us that local actors will hardly prioritize distant climate objectives over more immediate local concerns. Rather, the opposite is to be expected. Within the complexity of multi-level governance frameworks, local actors benefit from a wide margin of discretion offered by the implementation structures (see Steinbacher, 2025), and they often have leeway over the allocation of resources.

Therefore, *negotiation over policy contents* appears as a central missing element in the environmental agenda of NGEU. Two pitfalls can be identified regarding this element. First, negotiations at the EU level have been focused mainly on the financial distribution, leaving policy content to the side. Policy steering has been subordinated to budgetary negotiations (Schramm & Terranova, 2024). This also involves the “green transition” effort within the new model of “coordinative conditionality” heavily focused on expenditure (Ladi et al., 2025). Second, as already presented in Chapter 1, local actors have been de-facto excluded from such negotiations (Carrosio et al., 2022; Cotta & Domorenok, 2022; Zeitlin et al., 2023a; Urb@n.it, 2024).

Conversely, the empirical evidence suggests that policymakers at different levels of governance (be it EU, State, or local), should always consider the negotiation between top-down and bottom-up priorities. Evidence from the analysis shows that spending control and coordinative conditionality at the state-level are not sufficient to foster the adoption of new policymaking practices that are virtuous for the environment.

What more could be done?

About the incentives that could have fostered the local environmental actions, findings resonate with several other criticisms that have been moved towards the design and implementation NGEU and its state-level reception in the NRRPs (Cotta & Domorenok, 2022; Schramm et al., 2022; Zeitlin et al., 2023a, 2023b; Perotti & Boeri, 2023; Im et al., 2023; Polverari & Seddone, 2022).

The results of my analysis confirm that for local actors, NGEU and the NRRPs, are considered an external intervention, an unexpected distribution of money, almost a *deus-ex-machina* that comes on stage to gift money for projects that had been sitting in the administration drawers. In such circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising to observe empirically local actors sticking to established patterns of municipal policymaking. In both Lisbon and Genoa, following existing “business-as-usual” trajectories represented the most convenient course of action. Alternatives were not really considered.

Some interpretations are known to point at NGEU implementation as a “wasted opportunity” (Perotti & Boeri, 2023). Based on my research, I want to nuance this perspective. “Wasted opportunity” interpretations usually judge NGEU in classical economics terms: growth. My research does not touch specifically on this aspect,

but I believe this analysis shows how NGEU provided an unprecedented, but long awaited, boost to local public expenditure on key issues like transportation in Genoa and housing in Lisbon. As a counter-cyclical instrument, I believe the two local cases I observed support the *political* value of NGEU over the *economic*. Resources have been used to target key social issues impacting on the citizens' lives and well-being. At the same time, the will of NGEU to be the operational arm of the European Green Deal is certainly the goal that suffered the most from its implementation.

Looking forward, NGEU marks an important turning point in European fiscal policy and governance, which may well shape the trajectory of future EU climate action (Corti & Vesan, 2023; McNamara, 2024; Schramm & Terranova, 2024). In this perspective, I believe this research can suggest practical insights, if the goal is to couple economic development and climate goals. Below, some examples that can be drawn from the research on Genoa and Lisbon.

First, a striking gap in NGEU design is its lack of connection with other European initiatives for climate action. City networks in this case are paradigmatic. Initiatives like the Covenant of Mayors already had solid action plans for local climate action (SECAPs). Yet municipalities received little to no incentive in funding those activities with NGEU resources. Rewarding the use of resources to implement these actions would have been a great opportunity to boost the environmental component of NGEU. For example, one incentive could have been to dedicate part of the resources to this specific actions. Arguably, it could have also increased the interest of laggard cities to join city networks, in order to access new resources. Benefits would be mutual for both initiatives. This is a clear example of how a small modification in the design of the intervention could generate stronger outcomes. Pairing the “coordinative conditionality” (i.e. green tagging) with rewards for the implementation of SECAPs would represent a more concrete occasion to couple expenditure with policy content.

Second, participation is another great absentee. Citizens involvement has already been identified as a key element for the delivery of effective sustainable development policies (Layzer, 2002; Falanga et al., 2021; Büchs, 2021; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Parrique, 2022). From this perspective, open and transparent participatory or deliberative approaches could represent a solution to redistribute part of the decisional power to citizens. This would also offer a chance to experiment with creative and novel policy solutions that exit the entrenched sectoral logics and path dependent schemes. Incentives could include, for example, an extension in the deadlines of the projects to which participatory planning

contributed. This would make participation more appealing also to local decisionmakers enlarging their timespan for implementation. Most importantly, it could favour environmental innovations in policy content over the budgeting logics and entrenched administrative practices.

Third, performance management didn't prove to be a viable substitute for evaluation. The RRF system based on targets and milestones has been struggling to control implementation in a meaningful way. Quantitative targets have mostly targeted spending, with more concern over *how much* is spent than *with what impact*. Qualitative milestones have mostly been interpreted as a formal control over administrative procedural steps, rather than control over the actual *quality* of the actions undertaken. As a result, implementers are incentivized to maximise money expenditure to the detriment of actual policy contents. I believe lessons can be drawn from cohesion policy and structural funds, where the process of evaluation is linked to expenditure prior, during, and after implementation. Although more costly and time consuming, a proper evaluation system would guarantee a multi-faceted view on territorial investments, capable of capturing their actual contribution to the collective problems the programme wants to address. This would also stimulate local actors to contain tokenism, as their actions (not just the expenditure) would be put under tighter scrutiny.

5.3. Strengths and Limitations

Closing this Chapter, I want to briefly underline some strengths and limitations of this analysis. In essence, I believe it's right to be transparent about what this research can't do, what it can do better, and what worse. Overall, I present three characters of limitation and three of strength balancing each other. These are also summarized in Table 5.3 and 5.4.

Table 5.3 – Limitations of the analysis

	Character	Description
A	Regression	Mechanisms and empirical explanations are not unpacked to the finest detail possible
B	Reduction	Possible existence of unexplored elements that could be of importance
C	Empirical generalization	Findings cannot be validated on a statistical basis to produce predictive insights

Source: author's own elaboration

Table 5.4 – Strengths of the analysis

	Character	Description
A	Holism	Provides a rich account of key dynamics embedded in context
B	Emergence	Allows for relevant explanatory element to emerge on their own terms
C	Abstract generalization	Findings can provide original, abstract insights that refine theoretical knowledge and explore new hypotheses

Source: author's own elaboration

A first limitation is about *regression*. It's about the fact that, while the analysis has identified some mechanisms at work, it does not unpack them at the finest detail as other approaches to mechanistic studies do (see Busetti, 2016; Beach & Pedersen, 2019). It must be observed that the dilemma of regression is a classic epistemic problem of mechanistic analysis, and vastly depend on scope of the research and the depth of observation (Gerring, 2010). This means that there is always a matter of choice in deciding when to stop unpacking a dynamic. What defines the choice is not an objective epistemic limit to the depth of inquiry, but more mundane reasons of time and scope. When mechanisms are unpacked in their finest details, the goal is often that of testing or building specific theoretical propositions in strictly bounded cases to which full attention can be dedicated. Conversely, approaching mechanisms with the goal of understanding cases in their full complexity, usually implies a less mannerist unpacking of the causal chains. This is done to leave more time and effort to placing the dynamics into the larger context. The latter is my case. This connects to an element of strength, *holism*. A holistic approach to case studies makes the most out of placing inquiry within the context. This strengthen the research as it gives breadth to the overall analysis and makes the overall explanation of the case stronger (Thomas, 2015).

A second limitation is *reduction*. This means the plausibility that other relevant aspects and mechanisms besides the ones inquired remain undetected, either because they didn't emerge from empirical evidence and/or because the available evidence does not allow them to be outlined with sufficient precision. In other words, the explanation risks being incomplete. Like regression, reduction is another epistemic problem typical not only of mechanism-oriented analyses (Gerring, 2010) but, to some degree, touching any methodological approaches to social science. There could always be "something else", an intervening variable problem. I believe in this research *emergence* comes as a counterbalance to reduction, strengthening the overall analysis. Emergence is the evolving and incremental character of the research design and conduction, that accepts that some of the salient elements of the analysis could "boil to the surface" spontaneously. It implies following the

unexpected leads that manifest during the research, without the constraints of a rigid a-priori case bounding. It doesn't mean that everything that's important will surface (that's quite impossible for any study). But it's a good counterbalance to the risk of tunnel visioning, especially when trying to match abstract and volatile concepts like "policy integration" to concrete and complex real-world cases.

A third limitation is *empirical generalization*. In line with the methodology already presented in Chapter 3, this work never aimed to test or build theoretical propositions in the form of statistically valid nor predictive statements. That's not where in-depth qualitative case studies shine. What this study aims to do is providing original, creative, and unexpected elements that help refining and nuancing existing theory through *abstract generalizations*. Underlining it is a logic of discovery, a will to explore puzzling facts and stimulate new reflections and hypotheses. A similar caveat also applies to the pragmatic insights about the "real-world" problems. I don't have any claim of finding universal recommendations to solve the problem of environmental integration in local governance, either for NGEU or any other programme that might come to be. Yet, from this work it's possible to extrapolate cautious (but meaningful) policy insights that can stimulate productive reflections for practitioners and policymakers that find themselves in similar conditions to the ones I found in my cases.

*“That’s how you devour a whale, Doug. One bite
at a time”
- Frank Underwood, House of Cards, Chapter 01*

Conclusions

Concluding this monograph, I want to highlight the key takeaways that can be drawn from my work. Below, I will present a concise overview of the main original elements that characterize my research that I believe to be insightful and, perhaps, thought provoking.

I opened this work presenting the general topic, which is the role played by local policymakers in multi-level climate governance (Chapter 1). After reconstructing the core elements and evolutions of this nexus, I chose to focus on a specific problem. Not a “bad” kind of problem, like spraining an ankle or losing a key. A *research problem*, which is something curious and important, something worth knowing more about. The problem is transforming a European financial instrument (Next Generation Europe) into local actions that combine economic development with environmental action.

Why is this a problem? Because it’s one of the largest financial instruments in European history, and I believe is important to know more about how it works, and how that money is used. But also, because it’s part of the broader European climate agenda, which is important in defining the quality of life of hundreds of millions in future decades.

Then, in Chapter 2, I identified the elements that make this problem *scientifically* interesting for a broader public linking it to the debate in policy integration. This literature revolves around the idea of overcoming the typical fragmentation of policymaking, when policy problems involve different thematic sectors. This element connects particularly well with my research problem that, in turn, can help understanding some underdeveloped aspects of the literature. Specifically, the implementation gap, as the challenging process of translating an integrated policy designs into practice.

Next, I specified how I aim to conduct the study, based on my understanding of social science, and my approach to qualitative inquiry (Chapter 3). I do so by qualifying my position in the debate on methodological paradigms, describing the type of qualitative inquiry I have adopted, its strengths and weaknesses, and the kind of analysis I conducted with the empirical data.

Engaging in depth in two case-studies, Genoa and Lisbon, I presented my detailed narrative about local NGEU implementation (Chapter 4). This chapter is dedicated to a thick causal account NGEU implementation in the two cases. I chose to develop the narrative following how my own process of discovery developed along the empirical analysis. Starting from the inquiry of the patterns of territorial expenditure, I understood the complexity of NGEU as a distributive policy, but I also identified municipal administrations as central actors in both cases. This gave me the opportunity to focus my inquiry on them, looking for connections between the projects they funded and environmental issues. As I came to understand, however, NGEU projects were primarily following in a path-dependent pattern, rather than a green-transition one. From the evidence I collected, I could also outline three mechanisms, grounding the behaviour of the municipal actors to different rationales, embedded in institutional constraints. These mechanisms explain how the lack of integration in both cases came to be. One portrays to the tendency of nominal compliance with rules, *tokenism*. One portrays the tendency of sectoral boundaries to be shaped by the distribution of money, *budgeting*. One portrays the tendency of moving climate goals to a position of secondary importance, *displacement*.

Grounded in the empirical evidence, in Chapter 5 I explored the key “lessons” that can be drawn from the cases for both theory and practice. Theoretical insights nuance existing theoretical knowledge about policy integration in an exploratory way. Here I put forward five different propositions. While cautious in their approach to generalization, they stimulate critical reflections and suggest new directions for research. Below, I recall them schematically.

First, implementing policy integration happens at a balance of different rationales of the actors involved. While the bulk of the literature tends to adopt a narrow functionalist perspective, this research shows that different logics overlap. A logic of rules, a logic of money, and the logic of efficiency.

Second, the distribution of resources is an issue that is seldom addressed in integration literature but has a central spot in the empirical cases where the

boundaries of sectors are built around the budgeting logics. This highlights the role of money not as a mere consequence of fragmentation, but also as a cause of it.

Third, joint action problems typical of implementation processes can counterbalance the functional efficiency of integrated designs. As more cooperation entails more decisional bottlenecks, fragmentation is more functional to actors constrained by tight deadlines.

Fourth, policy integration is constrained by institutions, both horizontally and vertically. Adding a vertical dimension to an already fragmented process, will increase the appeal of reproducing fragmentation.

Fifth, path dependencies matter, as institutions resisting the processes of change entailed by policy integration. Sectoral policy patterns that are historically established could conflict with the implementation of integrated policy designs.

Finally, pragmatic insights subsume the lessons that can be extrapolated from the cases and adapted to the research problem. These provide reflections that can be interesting both academic and practitioners.

First, local actors matter. It takes just a little leeway to significantly impact a programme that was imposed on them from the top-down. This is what happened in both cases, where NGEU was taken by municipalities as an opportunity to fund established, pre-existing policy issues.

Second, municipalities used NGEU as an opportunity to fund local public expenditure on issues that are locally relevant. This brought oxygen to local public expenditure on social issues that had been hit hard by austerity, like housing and mobility. However, the will of NGEU to couple this expenditure with the Green Deal Goals has certainly suffered from a lack of incentives to local environmental action.

I conclude my argument by suggesting that future initiatives wishing to stimulate the integration of environmental goals in local expenditure can learn from NGEU. First, incentivising existing city network action plans (often voluntary and lacking resources) to access dedicated funding could enhance the centrality of environmental issues within the administrative machine. It could also stimulate new cities to join networks. Second, participatory and deliberative initiatives could represent an incentive to generate novel alternatives to the path-dependent sectoral policies. Third, setting a more careful system for evaluation that prioritizes

processes and outcomes over mere expenditure, could stimulate a better fit between top-down goals and bottom-up needs.

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Appendix 1

Samples of the interview guides

Guide sample A – public administrators

Professional history of the interviewee

- What is your role in the organization?
- What are your main duties?
- Does your work deal with topics related to the environment?

Main activity/policy/project involving the interviewee

- When did this activity/policy/project started being discussed in your organization?
- Did it take inspiration from previous activities/policies/projects?
- What are the challenges it wants to address?
- Are you coordinating with others during the implementation?
 - Who?
 - Can you tell me some exemplar stories?
- Did you ever attest any friction in the actions necessary to implement activity/policy/project, with other activities?
- Were there any “key moments”?
 - changes in the original program?
 - obstacles?
 - How were they overcome?
 - Tell me some exemplar stories about them
- Are there any other activity connected to this? Who can I talk with to know more about it?

Future scenarios

- If you had “the magic wand”, what would you change in your activity?
- Based on our discussion, imagine two scenarios, 5 years from now, one negative and one positive. Describe them to me

Guide sample B – Specialists

Professional history of the interviewee

- What is your role in the organization?
- What is your role and your area of work?
- Does you/your organization collaborate with public bodies? Tell me about them

Main activity/policy/project involving the interviewee

- How did you approach this activity/policy/project professionally?
- Are you familiar with the public organizations implementing this activity/policy/project?
 - Which are them?
 - What do you think about their actions
 - If I wanted to know more, could you suggest someone I could speak to?
- What are the main challenges you identify for this activity/policy/project
 - Can you tell me an example?
- Are you familiar with the NRRP?
 - What do you think about it?
 - Do you think it relates to the activity/policy/project?
 - Do you think it addresses topics related to sustainability?
 - What would you change about it?

Future scenarios

- Based on our discussion, imagine two scenarios, 5 years from now, one negative and one positive. Describe them to me

Appendix 2

List of the interviewees

GENOA

Table A2.1 – Interviewees in Genoa

	Role	Expertise type	Organization type	Level in the organization	Sector/area of expertise
1	Public administrator	Hybrid	Municipality	Middle-manager	Climate Change Adaptation
2	Public administrator	Bureaucratic	Municipality	Manager	Climate Change Mitigation
3	Public administrator	Bureaucratic	Municipality	Manager	NRRP management
4	Public administrator	Bureaucratic	Municipality	Manager	Urban public transport (NRRP)
5	City Councillor	Bureaucratic	Municipality	Councillor	Urban public transport (NRRP)
6	Public administrator	Bureaucratic	Agency for Genoa's reconstruction	Middle-manager	Urban Infrastructure
7	Advisor	Specialist	Agency for Genoa's reconstruction	Senior consultant	Port infrastructure (NRRP)
8	Advisor	Specialist	Agency for Genoa's reconstruction	Senior consultant	Port infrastructure (NRRP)
9	Public administrator	Specialist	Agency for the Port management	Civil servant	Port infrastructure (NRRP)
10	Public administrator	Bureaucratic	Agency for Genoa's reconstruction	Civil servant	Urban Infrastructure
11	Engineer	Specialist	Consulting firm	Consultant	Port infrastructure
12	Public administrator	Bureaucratic	Municipality	Manager	Urban Transport infrastructure (NRRP)
13	Consultant	Hybrid	Metropolitan administration	Senior consultant	Urban transport planning (NRRP)
14	Consultant	Specialist	Consulting firm	Consultant	Environmental planning

LISBON

Table A2.2 – Interviewees in Lisbon

	Role	Expertise type	Organization type	Level in the organization	Sector/area of expertise
1	Advisor	Specialist	Consulting firm	Manager	Metropolitan planning (NRRP)
2	Public administrator	Hybrid	Metropolitan administration	Manager	Metropolitan planning
3	Analyst	Specialist	University	Expert	Cohesion policy
4	Public administrator	Bureaucratic	Municipality	Middle-manager	Housing sustainability (NRRP)
5	Public administrator	Bureaucratic	Municipality	Middle-manager	Housing (NRRP)
6	Scholar	Specialist	University	Expert	Housing policy
7	Public administrator	Bureaucratic	Municipality	Manager	Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation
8	Public administrator	Bureaucratic	Municipality	Civil servant	Housing (NRRP)
9	Public administrator	Bureaucratic	Municipality	Civil servant	Housing (NRRP)
10	Public administrator	Bureaucratic	Municipality	Manager	Housing (NRRP)
11	Public administrator	Bureaucratic	Municipality	Civil servant	Housing (NRRP)
12	Consultant	Specialist	NGO (national)	Expert	Sustainable development
13	Consultant	Specialist	NGO (local)	Expert	Sustainable development
14	Consultant	Specialist	University	Expert	Local development
15	Public administrator	Bureaucratic	National Agency	Manager	NRRP implementation (national)

Appendix 3

Additional tables

Table A3.1 – Number of projects and investments (€ and %) per mission and component in Genoa

Mission	Component	Projects	Investment (€)	Investment (%)	
M1 - Digitalization	M1C1 – Digitalization in Public Administrations	120	18.968.188,05	1,36%	2,77%
	M1C2 – Digitalization for competition in the production system	49	6.106.847,06	0,44%	
	M1C3 – Tourism and culture	41	13.556.497,63	0,97%	
M2 – Green transition	M2C1 – Sustainable agriculture	14	25.762.290,91	1,85%	38,14%
	M2C2 – Green transition and Sustainable mobility	8	474.666.121,22	34,08%	
	M2C3 – Energy efficiency and building renovation	56	29.430.559,94	2,11%	
	M2C4 – Protection of land and water resources	1	1.291.156,52	0,09%	
M3 – Sustainable mobility infrastructure	M3C1 – Investment in the railway network	1	-	0,00%	2,45%
	M3C2 – Intermodality and integrated logistics	9	34.184.800,00	2,45%	
M4 – Education and Research	M4C1 – Enhancement of the education and research offering	477	102.614.647,92	7,37%	23,88%
	M4C2 – From research to enterprise	488	230.009.680,73	16,52%	
M5 – Social Inclusion	M5C1 – Labor policies	44	3.379.269,26	0,24%	17,01%
	M5C2 – Social infrastructure, families, communities and the third sector	69	233.499.289,21	16,77%	
	M5C3 – Special interventions for territorial cohesion	0	-	0,00%	
M6 – Healthcare	M6C1 – Proximity networks, structures and telemedicine	23	114.346.875,99	8,21%	14,13%
	M6C2 – Innovation, research and digitalization of the Healthcare System	94	82.453.075,29	5,92%	
M7 - RePowerEU	M7C1 – RepowerEU	1	22.356.816,46	1,61%	1,61%

Source: Author's own elaboration

Table A3.2 - Number of projects and investments (€ and %) per dimension and component in Lisbon

Dimension	Component	Projects	Investment (€)	Investment (%)	
D1 - Resilience	C01 – National Healthcare Service	32	316370454,11	13,97%	71,07%
	C02 - Housing	104	414.961.774,02	18,33%	
	C03 – Social Response	273	29.262.404,93	1,29%	
	C04 - Culture	135	168.522.585,94	7,44%	
	C05 - Business Capitalisation & Innovation	120	526.239.910,55	23,25%	
	C06 - Qualifications & Skills	1428	148.304.028,59	6,55%	
	C07 - Infrastructure	0	-	0,00%	
	C08 - Forests	5	5.173.543,25	0,23%	
	C09 - Water Management	0	-	0,00%	
D2 – Climate Transition	C10 - Sea	3	52.249.100,00	2,31%	23,52%
	C11 - Industrial Decarbonisation	12	37.134.729,55	1,64%	
	C12 - Bio-economy	1	65.319,80	0,00%	
	C13 - Energy Efficiency in Buildings	40	57.883.466,19	2,56%	
	C14 - Hydrogen & Renewables	0	-	0,00%	
	C15 - Sustainable Mobility	21	385.153.902,91	17,01%	
D3 – Digital Transition	C16 - Industry 4.0 / Business 4.0	319	64.160.120,42	2,83%	4,85%
	C17 - Financial Quality & Sustainability	1	1.704.000,00	0,08%	
	C18 - Economic Justice & Business Environment	0	-	0,00%	
	C19 - Digital Public Administration	226	43.994.508,56	1,94%	
	C20 - Digital School	0	-	0,00%	
D4 – RePowerEU	C21 - RepowerEU	2	12.690.222,00	0,56%	0,56%

Source: Author's own elaboration

Appendix 4

Map of the “Genoa 2030” infrastructural strategy



