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The Impact of the Discretion and Coping Strategies of SLBs on Conditionality The Role of the Frontline Workers of Employment Centres in the Implementation of Citizen Income in Italy*

Matteo Bassoli, Giorgia Nesti

This article introduces the concept of discretion and coping strategies of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) in the context of the Italian Citizen Income (*Reddito di Cittadinanza*) scheme. It critically assesses the application of discretion by frontline workers at Employment Centres, investigating how their decisions influence program delivery and policy outcomes. Through an in-depth case study in the Veneto region, the analysis highlights varied approaches to conditionality, reflecting a mix of compliance and coping strategies employed by workers facing bureaucratic pressures and beneficiary interactions. Methodologically, we combine quantitative data from regional beneficiary records with qualitative insights from interviews with Employment Centre staff. Findings suggest significant regional variations in the application of conditionalities, influenced by both individual discretion and institutional directives.

Keywords: Street-level bureaucracy; Discretion; Coping mechanisms; Conditionalities; Minimum income scheme.

1. Introduction

The use of bureaucratic discretion has increasingly become an integral part of the delivery of welfare services, in particular at local level

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(Brodkin 1997). As argued by Andreotti *et al.* (2023), the emergence in Europe of a new welfare state characterised by a multi-level organisation has called for frontline workers (or street-level bureaucrats, SLBs) to engage actively in solving complex and heterogeneous social needs. Thus, discretion represents a particularly relevant topic in the field of welfare policies not only because it can impact upon the capacity of organisations to deliver service in a coherent and effective way (Scott 1997), but also because it influences the possibility of citizens accessing services and their right to be treated in a fair way (Brodkin 2020).

The role of the discretion of SLBs has been investigated in particular with regard to the provision of minimum income schemes (MIS) (Sandfort 2000; Riccucci 2002; Immervoll 2009; Leibetseder *et al.* 2015; Nothdurfter 2016; Cacciapaglia 2023). MIS are, in fact, complex programmes, which combine economic transfers with activation and social policies, and SLBs are often called upon to decide which programmes meet the beneficiaries' needs best, which services should be used, and to manage the combinations of the different social and economic interventions required by these programmes accordingly (Rice 2013; Fuertes and Lindsay 2016). But active policies entail, moreover, the adoption of conditionalities – which are specific requirements placed on beneficiaries in order to ensure responsible use of public resources, to encourage participation in societal activities, and to promote self-sufficiency. SLBs can use their discretion also to decide upon whether and how to sanction a citizen if he or she does not comply with these requirements (Jessen and Tufte 2014). Thus, conditionalities can have a direct impact upon programme accessibility, policy effectiveness, and social justice. Although the literature on SLBs has developed considerably since the seminal work of Lipsky (2010), research on the adoption of discretion by SLBs in applying conditionalities is still under-developed.

The present article is aimed at contributing to this literature through the analysis of the case study of the implementation of Citizen Income (*Reddito di cittadinanza*) in the Veneto region. The Citizen Income is a conditional Minimum Income Scheme (MIS) introduced by the Italian Government in 2019. Citizen Income is granted to beneficiaries according to strict eligible criteria and combines a cash transfer delivered by the National Social Insurance Agency (*Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale*, INPS) with the supply of a mix of welfare and workfare provisions delivered by Municipal Social Services and/or by local Employment Centres (*Centri per l'impiego*, CPI). In the present article, we will focus only on the use of conditionality as adopted by

CPIs. According to the procedure, CPI case workers should contact the Citizen Income beneficiary and schedule a meeting with him or her. During the meeting, the case manager presents the Employment Pact (an individualized project) to the beneficiary and designs an activation process tailored on the beneficiary's employment needs that would help him or her in finding a job opportunity and/or in participating in a training programme. The Employment Pact must be signed by the beneficiary to attest to his or her commitment to accept the terms and participate in the activation process. If the beneficiary misses the appointment for the interview without justifying his or her absence, the CPI case manager is entitled to warn the National Security Insurance Agency (INPS) – the application of the conditionality – this, in turn, will suspend the Citizen Income.

Drawing on the empirical observations of local experience of the implementation of the Citizen Income, the article seeks to investigate two aspects. First, it delves into the concept of discretion to scrutinise how SLBs adopt related coping strategies when they manage conditionalities. Namely, we are particularly interested in analysing how these practices affect the interaction between frontline workers operating in the Employment Centres of the Veneto region and the Citizen Income beneficiaries. Second, the article tries to identify the motivations behind the behaviour of the SLBs and their implications in terms of equity and social justice in the implementation of MIS.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on the discretion of SLBs and analyses how this capacity can influence policy implementation through the adoption of coping mechanisms. Drawing on Tummers *et al.*'s classification (2015), we will set out the different ways in which the coping strategies adopted by SLBs can influence the interaction between civil servants and beneficiaries. We will then focus our attention on a specific aspect of the implementation of MIS, that is, the delivery or application of conditionalities. These obligations are part of a general transformation that have affected European welfare states in the last thirty years and have increasingly introduced work-for-benefit programmes and the promotion of reciprocity, fairness, and responsiveness among welfare recipients (Fletcher 2020). Investigating how discretion and coping can affect the delivery of conditionalities is still an under-developed research area that merits more attention both for explaining the attitudes of SLBs towards beneficiaries, and for assessing its implication on the rights of welfare recipients to access services.

Section 3 describes the methodology, while Section 4 presents and discusses the results of the empirical analysis of the selected case

study. The Conclusions section summarises the findings, highlights their contribution to the literature, assesses their limitations, and proposes a future research agenda.

2. Street Level Bureaucrats and the Use of Discretion and of Coping Mechanisms in the Context of Conditionalities

SLBs are ‘public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work’ (Lipsky 2010, 3). SLBs can wield their discretion in several phases of service delivery: the needs assessment of beneficiaries, the definition of the individual projects, and sanctioning. According to Davis, «a public officer has discretion whenever the effective limits on his power leave him free to make a choice among possible courses of action or inaction» (1969, 4 cited in Evans 2010). Discretion is therefore one of the main attributes of SLBs who use it to decide autonomously whether, and if so, how to sanction or to reward a citizen when implementing a service (Hupe and Hill 2007; Lipsky 2010; Tummers and Bekkers 2014).

One way through which discretion is implemented is by adopting coping mechanisms (Dallara and Lacchei 2021; Tummers *et al.* 2015). According to Lipsky (2010), SLBs develop coping strategies «to create a manageable workload» (Hupe and Buffat 2014, 551), since they often act in a context characterised by scarce resources, complex duties, and the complex demands raised by beneficiaries (Brodkin 2012). According to Tummers *et al.*, coping can be defined as the «behavioral efforts frontline workers employ when interacting with beneficiaries, in order to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts they face on an everyday basis» (2015, 1100). This behavioural approach differentiates itself from the cognitive strategies of coping since it is shaped by the organisational context within which the interaction between the front-line worker and the beneficiary takes place, while the latter is determined by the attitudes of the SLBs towards the beneficiaries. As a result of their systematic literature review, Tummers *et al.* (2015) identify three families of coping mechanisms: *moving towards* beneficiaries, *moving away* from beneficiaries, and *moving against* beneficiaries (see also Lacchei 2023).

The «moving towards beneficiaries» family of coping mechanisms entails the adjustment of the procedures and rules in place to cope with beneficiary’s needs. Five mechanisms (*rule bending*, *rule breaking*, *instrumental action*, *prioritising resources*, and *the use of personal*

resources) compose this family. *Rule bending* is the adaptation of rules to the situation to benefit the beneficiaries. *Rule breaking* is the deliberative neglect of the rules. The strategy can also imply the development of long-term strategies to manage stressful situations (*instrumental action*). The fourth mechanism refers to *prioritising the beneficiaries* usually in the case of high workload and shortage of results. The last mechanism is the *use of personal resources*, such as own money and/or working overtime, which are invested beyond the required activities, in order to support beneficiaries.

The «moving away from beneficiaries» family of coping mechanisms implies the management of beneficiaries in a standardised way (*routinisation*) or the adoption of strategies to make the access to services more difficult (*rationing*), for instance, by decreasing the service availability. All these strategies are aimed at preventing significant interactions between the SLBs and the beneficiaries.

The «moving against beneficiaries» family of coping mechanisms refers to the rigid approach of an SLB to rule implementation (*rigid rule following*) that simplifies the working practices of SLBs and allow them to control the beneficiaries, eventually penalising them. But it can also involve aggressive forms of behaviour (*aggression*) enacted by front-line workers as a response to the aggressive behaviour of beneficiaries or as a reaction to situations of high stress.

An interesting, albeit under-investigated, field of research relates to the adoption of discretion and coping mechanisms in the delivery of conditionalities under the MIS. Conditionalities are specific obligations that stipulate that the beneficiaries of the MIS are required to comply with the activation measures. These requirements have increasingly become central in welfare states since the 1990s due to the diffusion of neoliberal ideas and the Blairian «Third Way» that put strong emphasis on the rhetoric of responsiveness and deservedness (Busso *et al.* 2023; Fletcher 2020). In the context of the MIS, therefore, conditionality has been entrenched in the idea that who benefits from a welfare measure should, in turn, contribute productively in order to deserve it, and that inactive people should be considered unworthy (Layton 2020; McGann *et al.* 2020). According to McGann *et al.*, «case-workers may inhibit conditionality policies if they exercise leniency when deciding whether to recommend sanctions for noncompliant behaviours» (2020, 470). The study of discretion applied to conditionalities is particularly relevant because it sheds light on the role of SLBs in implementing policies, but it is also relevant in order to assess the potential impact that it could have on the beneficiaries of the MIS. In the following sections, we shall try to answer our research questions

by describing how SLBs have managed conditionalities in the territory of the Veneto region and by applying the framework developed by Tummers *et al.* (2015) to explain the potential motivations driving these choices.

3. Methodology

In this section, following the guiding principles of Ashworth *et al.* (2019), we present the methodology used, the data collection, and the analysis. The article is part of wider research on Minimum Income (Anonymized), although we focus here only on conditionality and street level bureaucracy. We consider only one specific case of conditionality, i.e., the communication made by CPI case workers to INPS of the non-attendance at the first interviews which were not justified by beneficiaries and led to the suspension of the Citizen Income cash transfer. Beside this type of conditionality, that Gori *et al.* label «towards services», the Law provides also for the conditionality «towards employment» (2022). This latter mechanism would entail that the beneficiary loses the Income if he/she refuses a job offer twice. Remarkably, while the first type of conditionality was adopted in every Italian region, the second type of conditionality was almost never implemented (MLPS 2021)¹. Moreover, there are no consistent data available neither at the local nor at the national level about this second type of potential sanctions. We opted, therefore, to investigate the «conditionality toward services» because it is the only measure effectively applied by CPI and for which we were able to collect reliable data.

We opted for a qualitative-quantitative investigation to study the case management of the entities responsible for delivering the service in detail. As for the quantitative part, we were granted access to the Veneto Region Dashboard, which provides detailed information about the 54,352 Citizen Income recipients. The dashboard provides detailed information at aggregate level of the seven provinces and the 39 Employment Centres (see Appendix, Table 4) about citizenship (196 countries and stateless), age (18-68), gender (male, female, n/a), and the administrative situation of the beneficiaries. The dashboard covers five years: 2019-2023. However, according to the Veneto region, only the 2019-2022 data are reliable (see Appendix, Table 5).

With regard to the qualitative part, we conducted 32 in-depth

¹ The report of the national Committee for the Evaluation of the Citizen Income states that the conditionality toward employment was used only three times in Italy but there are no data available related to this information.

interviews with operators from all the Employment Centres of the Veneto region (see Appendix, Table 6). The interviews were made between September 2020 and March 2021. To conclude, we also collected information from two different target groups: an online survey of 100 Navigators – professional figures tasked with supporting beneficiaries in order to help them access job opportunities, and assist them in the activation of personalised paths towards employment – of the Veneto in June-July 2021 (response rate 100%) and an online survey of 165 operators in the Employment Centres in the Veneto in October 2021 (response rate 100%).

The quantitative data were analysed using chi-square, but, given the limited number of conditionality delivered, it was not possible to run disaggregated analysis on many items. For the qualitative part, we transcribed the interviews, and we imported them into NVivo. The original analysis was aimed at shedding light on the administrative capacity (Anonymized), the governance structure (Anonymized), and the co-production of the services (Anonymized). In this process, we also included a specific coding for the use of discretion. We later re-read the whole corpus to distinguish the three types of coping strategies proposed in Section 2. The survey was used to supplement the available data.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data in our study enables us to draw on the strengths of both approaches. Quantitative data provide a broad, generalizable understanding of trends and patterns shedding lights of emerging issues, while qualitative data offer deep, contextual insights into individual experiences and organizational processes. By combining these methods, we can cross-validate findings, enrich our understanding of complex issues, and provide a more comprehensive picture of the case management and service delivery processes. The qualitative insights help to interpret and give context to the quantitative results, thereby addressing any gaps or limitations inherent in using a single method. In conclusion, this mixed-methods approach ensures a robust and well-rounded analysis, enhancing the reliability and validity of our findings.

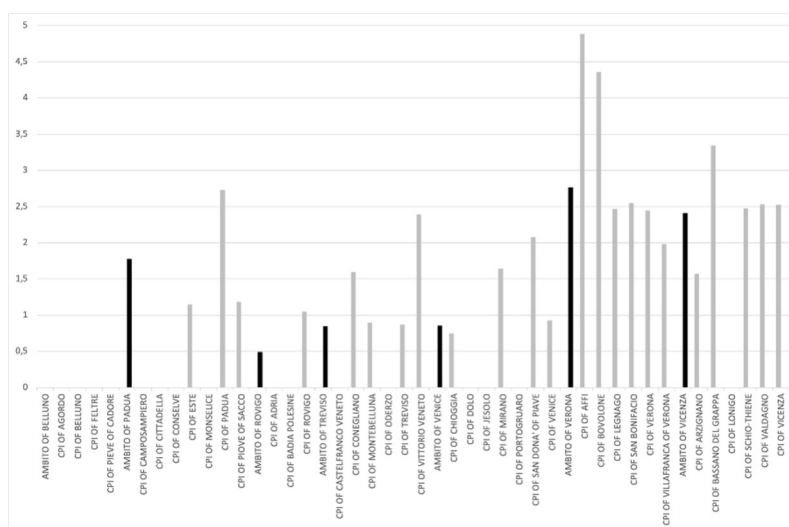
4. Data and Discussion

The Delivery of Conditionalities in the Veneto Region

The rate of referral for conditionality was analysed by checking the number of conditionalities issued by each CPI of the Veneto region

due to the non-justified absence of the Citizen Income beneficiary. This rate is extremely low but also heterogeneous. While the Veneto average is 1.62 per thousand, there are CPIs and provinces (*Ambiti*) with a rate of zero (Belluno and all its CPIs) and CPIs with a rate above 3 (twice or thrice the average). Notably, the concentration is not driven by the number of cases by CPIs, but, rather, by the distribution among provinces. There are provinces with all their CPIs above average (such as Verona) and provinces lower than the average in all its components (such as Treviso). The median number of conditionalities for the CPIs is just below 1, suggesting that the distribution is skewed towards zero: a quarter of the CPIs have zero cases, two quarters have an average between 0 and 2.4 cases per thousand, and only a quarter above 2.4 (see Appendix, Figure 4). Here is a detailed picture of the situation.

FIG. 1. *Distribution of conditionalities across CPIs (average per unit, per thousand cases).*



The statistical analysis can be run only at the higher level since it is constrained by the technical requirements: there are too few conditionalities delivered. The total number of beneficiaries of the Citizen Income in fact is 54,352, with only 88 experiencing conditionality, representing a mere 0.16% of the total. Nonetheless, the analysis reveals the presence of significant disparities in their use. The provinces

of Verona and Vicenza register the highest number of conditionalities delivered across their territories, with Padua following suit². On the other side, the provinces with the lowest number of conditionalities are Belluno, Rovigo, Treviso and Venice (see Table 1).

TAB. 1. *Distribution of Citizen Income beneficiaries across provinces, by conditionality status (absolute values and percentage).*

	No. of Citizen Income Beneficiaries	Without conditionality***	With Conditionality***	Percentage
Total	54,352	54,264	88	0.16
Belluno	1,323	1,323	0	0.00
Padua	10,691	10,672	19	0.18
Rovigo	4,072	4,070	2	0.05
Treviso	8,270	8,263	7	0.08
Venice	10,544	10,535	9	0.09
Verona	11,566	11,534	32	0.28
Vicenza	7,886	7,867	19	0.24

$\chi^2 (13, N = 54,352) = 24.6284, p = 0.0004^{***}$

A second interesting aspect emerging from our data refers to the fact that the delivery of the conditionalities is extremely concentrated in the year 2022 (see Fig. 2), suggesting a profound change in the general attitude of SLBs.

These data can be better understood by also considering other data relating to Citizen Income beneficiaries, those who had a meeting scheduled at the CPI but did not go to the Employment Centre – without a justification – without INPS suspending their Citizen Income. As highlighted by Figure 3, the highest rate of «non-justified absences» is, again, concentrated in 2022, a situation which provoked a more frequent use of conditionalities.

² The analysis was later controlled by merging Belluno and Rovigo as robustness check, Chi-Square requires to have all expected values different from zero and 80% above 5. The results do not change, we thus present the analysis by province.

FIG. 2. *Distribution of Conditionalities in the Years (Average per unit in per thousand).*

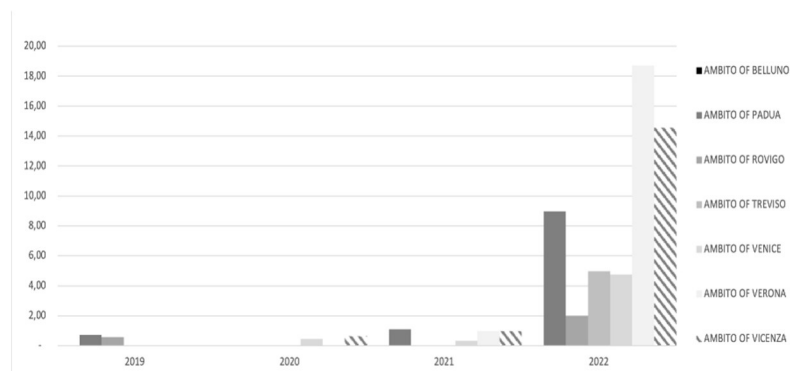
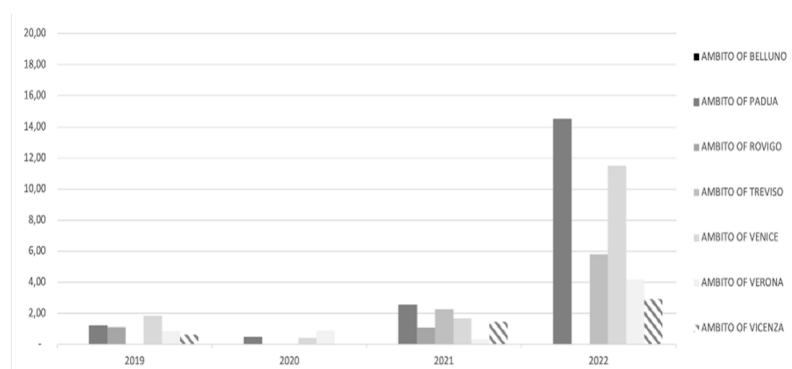


FIG. 3. *Distribution of Non-justifications across Provinces (Average per unit in per thousand).*



Nevertheless, we also cannot forget the contextual factors. The year 2019 registered a limited number of conditionalities, because it was the first year of the implementation of Citizen Income. The system was not working fully, and the workflow had still not been set up. With regard to the year 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic broke-out and the whole procedure had to be re-calibrated, since the conditionalities were suspended by the government. At the same time, the year 2021 did not register a different level of conditionality, but only a limited

growth of ‘non-justified’ absence, from 0.9 per thousand in 2019 to the 1.5 per thousand in 2021 (see Fig. 3). The year 2022 witnessed an extreme growth of both of ‘non-justified’ absence and conditionalities. Notably 2022 also recorded the lowest number of beneficiaries.

To address potential explanation for the differences between provinces in applying conditionalities, we first investigated the influence of demographic variables characterising beneficiaries. We first considered gender, to assess whether SLBs tended to sanction more women than men (Rice 2012; Jilke and Tummers 2018; Durose and Lowndes 2023). We discovered that women have a similar rate of conditionality to that of men (lower, but statistically not significant) (see Appendix, Table 7) and their chance of receiving a conditionality is the same across provinces. The same does not hold true for men, since their chance of receiving a conditionality is significantly higher in Verona, Vicenza and to some extent in the city of Padua, and lower in Venice, Belluno, and Rovigo for men (see Table 2).

TAB. 2. *Distribution of conditionality across provinces, by men and women.*

	Total non-male	Conditionality on non-male	Percentage	Total male	Conditionality on male**	Percentage
Total	29,360	39	0.13	24,992	49	0.20
Belluno	664	0	0.00	659	0	0.00
Padua	5,819	8	0.14	4,872	11	0.23
Rovigo	2,158	2	0.09	1,914	0	0.00
Treviso	4,473	4	0.09	3,797	3	0.08
Venice	5,670	3	0.05	4,874	6	0.12
Verona	6,328	15	0.24	5,238	17	0.32
Vicenza	4,248	7	0.16	3,638	12	0.33

Women: χ^2 (6, N =29,360) =10.03, p = 0.1235; Men: χ^2 (6, N =24,992) =16.9954, p = 0.0093***.

We secondly analysed whether citizenship could predict SLBs propensity to use sanctions (Dubois 2010; Rice 2012; Jilke and Tummers 2018), foreigners have the same chance of receiving a conditionality

in the different provinces, while Italians have different chances (see Appendix, Table 8 and 9). However, the probability of receiving a conditionality is higher for foreigners than for Italians (see Table 3).

TAB. 3. *Distribution of conditionality between Italian and foreigners.*

	Total	Italians	Foreigners	Percentage
Total	54,352	34,569	19,783	36.40
Conditionality	88	47	41	46.59
Non-conditionality	54,264	34,522	19,742	36.38

$\chi^2 (1, N = 54,352) = 3.9562, p = 0.0467^{**}$

We subsequently tried to identify if it was a matter of citizenship only, or rather a matter of country of origin. We thus tried a different subdivision of the sample. Exploiting the country division of the Dashboard, we assessed the difference between a list of developed³ and developing countries. As in the previous case, there is a significant difference between OECD and non-OECD countries, and citizens of the latter face a higher level of rate of conditionality (0.22% vs. 0.14%) (see Appendix, Table 10). However the distinction does not trigger any substantial differences across provinces (see Appendix, Table 11), because the size of the Italian population strongly influences the distribution of both Citizen Income and conditionality.

Discretion and Attitudes towards Citizen Income Beneficiaries

To grasp better the differences in the number of conditionalities, we analysed the qualitative interviews with case workers. Remarkably, in the CPIs where the rate of conditionality delivered is higher than average – that is, in the provinces of Verona, Vicenza, and the Municipality of Padua – all the case workers interviewed adopted a tendential, strict sanctioning attitude towards Citizen Income beneficiaries:

Let us assume that the worker does not show up at the appointed time: the indication we have is that at the end of the [day] or even immediately [...] at

³ The list available in the system is a revised version of OECD countries: EU countries, Argentina, Australia, Chile, Israel, Japan, Kuwait, New Zealand, Switzerland, and USA (plus countries without beneficiaries).

the end of the working day we immediately apply the start of the conditionality [...] At this point the indication I give to my colleagues is ... Wait for the famous next day. Let's wait another day. Let's go and check whether justifications have arrived in the Employment Centre's e-mails [...] At that point we take charge of the file, if we verify that there are no justifications at all, the conditionality starts for us immediately (4th quartile, Int. 20).

The first cases, as I told you before, arrived around October-November and we immediately reported them, especially those cases where we could not contact beneficiaries because we had no reference, we had nothing, also on the instructions of our management (3rd quartile, Int. 26).

Certainly, having linked [the conditionality] to the Employment Pact, it becomes a duty of our office to report any non-compliance (3rd quartile, Int. 26).

Those who are not particularly interested are almost untraceable. [...] Those are the ones that I, as the person in charge of the job centre, have to warn (3rd quartile, Int. 2).

The case workers in these provinces are particularly concerned with legality and the Citizen Income requirements combined with a normative attitude according to which beneficiaries must prove themselves to be active in order to «deserve» the MIS:

Certainly the conditionality is due, that is to say, it is also an assumption of responsibility of the beneficiary (3rd quartile, Int. 26).

You have to breathe down their neck, because it is clear that the 50 per cent [of beneficiaries] would rather prefer to be at home on the sofa doing other things, no? (3rd quartile, Int. 2).

Thus, some actors have proudly implemented the conditionality, considering it a positive aspect that should be promoted. The normative dimension, which surfaced in the public debate, openly emerged during implementation. A clear example of this attitude can be found in one of the more restrictive CPI:

I wanted to add that the Citizen Income is not a passive policy, it is an active policy, i.e., people have to motivate themselves. If we did not apply conditionality, however painful it might be in some cases, it would no longer be seen as an active policy, but as a passive policy. And this is wrong because it serves precisely to get people who are stuck with other forms of aid moving. At the first interview, I try in every way to explain clearly to people that they

will be called [...], that they must attend the interview, and what the justifications that they can put forward are... that they can't phone and tell me «My child is ill» without a medical certificate, or «I did not realise it, I did not read it». Unfortunately, these can't be justifications and people must learn to face up to their responsibilities. I don't want to seem cynical, but it often happens ... Otherwise, the [Citizen Income] becomes a passive measure, a sort of welfareism that will never reach its goals (3rd quartile, Int. 26).

If we moved to the CPIs that have a rate of referral of conditionalities which is below the average, the situation is more nuanced. The analysis of interviews is not fully consistent; nevertheless, in some cases, a more compassionate approach to the delivery of conditionalities emerges:

We have always tried, here, in our own small way, to meet them halfway, in the sense that, afterwards, if they called us to say «I can't that day», I'd say «just come the next day, but please come» (1st quartile, Int. 1).

This compassion later translated into the possibility for the civil servant to work within the limits of law or even on the threshold of legality, following single cases and taking the multifaceted nature of human behaviour into consideration:

It's clear that you have to look at it case by case, we're talking about particular subjects [...] I don't know, you help the person, sometimes even you scold them, if you know what I mean. You make them understand the importance of what they are doing, that's all (1st quartile, Int. 29).

Before sanctioning a user, we follow him or her just because we suppose that a Citizen Income beneficiary, as we can see, is a person in extreme need. Thus, we do not apply sanctions «with the axe»... If you do not come here for the interview, we call you and call you again... Phone numbers that do not exist anymore... and then they say that they moved away ... they don't have the required documents ... Every case is unique, and the well-known handbook does not help. In any event and with every case, you have to use that famous common sense that is not taught in the handbook but that is learned from the experience of your daily job (1st quartile, Int. 11).

These civil servants acknowledge that Citizen Income beneficiaries are a target group of people who have specific needs. Most of them, in fact, are old men (around 55 years old), unemployed, with low levels of education, low qualifications, sometimes also with complex family situations. Our interviews highlight that these SLBs adopt a more emphatical approach towards beneficiaries. Thus, it becomes difficult

for them to sanction persons already in difficulty and SLBs prefer, therefore, not to apply rigidly the rules but to bend them:

We also tried to go as far as possible, because what do you do? And to apply as little conditionality as possible. You also see such peculiar situations. You don't really want to get into them, you shouldn't say that, but we have tried to do that (1st quartile, Int. 1).

The people we see at the Job Centre all have deep problems in some way, and for many of them perhaps work is not even the essential issue because there are people in obvious distress who unfortunately (or fortunately) have not been assigned to the social services of the municipalities. [...] But it is clear that, with respect to certain targets, we must also have that kind of attention and approach, even if we are not psychologists, we are not social workers, OK? But let's say that a good level of humanity is maintained (1st quartile, Int. 14).

It is important, however, to underline that, in the end, bending the rules does not mean that these SLBs do not comply with the procedures. They do not unknowledge they are breaking the rules. They only relax the terms while they can, then they urge the beneficiaries to motivate themselves, and eventually apply the sanction:

So, let's say that we have had very few cases of people who, in the end, did not turn up and we have applied conditionality to them (3rd quartile, Int. 27).

I had to apply, against my will, some conditionalities because people who were summoned did not show up,... they were re-contacted, re-solicited... they still did not show up, and we had to notify INPS, which disqualified these people (1st quartile, Int. 4).

Common to all the case workers in the provinces is the attitude towards foreign beneficiaries. The propensity to sanction them through conditionalities mainly stems from the difficulties these beneficiaries experience with the Citizen Income procedures:

We have a heavily non-EU clientele, so taking care of these people has led to some critical issues (3rd quartile, Int. 26).

We mainly deliver conditionality either because they do not show up or because they are abroad (1st quartile, Int. 12).

Foreign beneficiaries are, in fact, sometimes not fully aware of the referral process and the activation measures in which they are

supposed to participate in order to maintain the cash transfer. Thus, they change phone number and/or move abroad and become untraceable when they are contacted by case workers who wish to schedule the first meeting. Moreover, they often lack the digital and language skills necessary to be informed and to interact with the civil servants. But the CPI case workers, albeit acknowledging these problems, decide to apply sanctions.

Street Level Bureaucracy and Different Types of Coping Mechanisms

Drawing on our data, we can hypothesize that, in the case of CPI case workers, the first aspect that influenced the delivery of conditionalities across the years and in the provinces was nourished by internal and external factors, such as the put into operation of the measure in 2019 and the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 in 2020 and in part of 2021. Due to this exceptional situation, the government changes the management of the Citizen Income referral procedure and suspended the sanctions. Following the budgetary law issued on 30 December 2021 (Law 234/2021) new controls on the delivery of the Citizen Income were introduced in 2022 and in this period conditionalities were again delivered by CPI case workers, with the highest number concentrated in the areas of Verona, Vicenza, and the city of Padua.

The analysis of socio-demographic data related to beneficiaries did not highlight significant trends in receiving conditionalities at the territorial level. Only gender seems to have an impact since in the provinces of Vicenza and Verona a higher rate of men received a conditionality. Our interviews, nevertheless, do not provide for an explanation of this aspect.

We use information from the qualitative analysis in order to analyse how CPI's frontline workers apply discretion in the provision of conditionalities. The analysis of our qualitative interviews suggests that SLBs operating in the provinces of Vicenza, and Verona and in the city of Padua adopted a more restrictive approach to the provision of conditionalities. Following the tripartite typology of SLBs' coping mechanism developed by Tummers *et al.* (2015), we identified a tendency to sanction beneficiaries, thus 'moving against' them, as a consequence of *rigid rule following*.

On the other side, SLBs employed in the CPIs with the lowest rate of conditionalities were more 'permissive'. In these CPIs, the decision not to sanction beneficiaries is mainly implemented by the SLBs by

bending the rules related to conditionalities, thus ‘moving towards them’. This approach is applied by SLBs in order to cope with beneficiaries’ needs, especially in the case of foreign people since the SLBs are aware of the difficulties that these persons can experience in the referral process. But our findings also reveal that this approach is not ‘stretched’ to the point of breaking the rules.

Our empirical data do not provide for a strong, univocal explanation of the two different SLBs’ attitudes. We hypothesize that SLBs manage conditionalities as a consequence of a role conflict they experience between policy prescriptions and clients’ expectations and behaviours (Tummers *et al.* 2012). According to Vink *et al.* (2015) the ‘policy-client conflict’⁴ produces a stressful situation for SLBs deriving from an incongruence between the role behaviour demanded by the policy and the role behaviour demanded by clients. SLBs can try to solve this type of conflict by rejecting it or by adapting the situation to clients’ needs (Leonardi *et al.* 2021).

In the case of CPIs with lowest rates of conditionalities, we hypothesize that SLBs tried to solve the conflict among policy and client roles through the temporary adaptation of the policy process to beneficiaries’ needs. As argued by Leonardi *et al.* (2021) «Solving the policy-client conflict towards clients may increase the probability of realizing the service in the short term and retaining the client on a long-term basis.» (2021, 91). Interestingly, this *behaviour coping strategy* is combined also with elements of another family of coping strategies identified by Tummers *et al.* (2015), that is, *cognitive coping*. This concept refers to all the mechanisms put in place by SLBs and pertaining to the emotional sphere of the interaction with the beneficiaries. One of these mechanisms is ‘compassion towards clients’ (Tummers *et al.* 2015, 1102). Following Ropes and De Boers, we define compassion as «a set of subprocesses that involve feeling touched by a person’s suffering, an affective state often referred to as empathic concern [...] and the motivation to help» (2021, 726). Thus, a compassionate SLB acknowledges the beneficiaries’ problems, feels in touch with them, and is therefore motivated to help them (Ropes and De Boers 2023). This dynamic is clearly present in the interaction between the Citizen Income beneficiaries and some CPI frontline workers who chose not to sanction the beneficiaries who were incompliant with the activation requirements, as illustrated by quotations. Nevertheless, we also found that the compassionate attitude is «mitigated» by moral

⁴ Drawing on Tummers *et al.* (2012), Vink *et al.* (2015) identify four role conflicts that frontline workers can experience in public service delivery: policy-professional, organizational-professional, professional-client, and policy-client.

judgements expressed by SLBs about the beneficiaries' deservedness and willingness to activate themselves (Lipsky 2010; Keulemans and Van de Walle 2020).

In the case of CPIs with the highest rate of conditionalities, we hypothesize that SLBs adopted rigid rule following as a strategy to refuse the conflict and to bring the referral process back into the tracks of the established policy goals. In 2022, in fact, more controls were issued by the government in Citizen Income's implementation and the SLBs belonging to these provinces probably interiorised a stricter commitment to pursue Citizen Income policy goals. Interestingly, also in this case we can figure out elements of cognitive coping but not linked to the emotional sphere. SLBs perceives in fact conditionalities as a «stick» that they could use to induce the beneficiaries to comply with the activation measures and to «educate» them to a responsible behaviour towards the community. They adopt, therefore, a «moralising» behaviour aimed at disciplining reluctant beneficiaries (Leonardi *et al.* 2021).

5. Conclusions

Our article was firstly designed to examine how SLBs wield their discretionary power through the adoption of coping strategies in their relationship with welfare recipients. To this end, we examined the case of the Veneto region and the process of the delivery of conditionalities by the SLBs operating in the 39 Employment Centres (CPIs) of the seven provinces (*Ambiti*). Our analysis highlighted that the number of sanctions adopted by the SLBs was generally low and concentrated in the year 2022, but also that there were two provinces which reported the highest number of delivered conditionalities – Verona and Vicenza, and the Municipality of Padua. Through the analysis of qualitative interviews and drawing on Tummers *et al.*'s typology (2015), we hypothesized that both SLBs who «moved against beneficiaries» by following the rules rigidly and those who «moved towards beneficiaries» by bending the rules adopted coping strategies aimed at solving the tensions arising from the «policy-client conflicts». Rejection and adaptation to the conflictual situation are both strategies enhanced to try to re-align the implementation process to the established policy goals. But SLBs' use of discretion was also influenced by cognitive mechanisms related to morale and compassion. Frontline workers act, therefore, both as state agents, following rules, procedures, and law, but also as citizen's

agents, by responding to the claimants' needs (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000).

The main consequence of the co-existence of these opposite types of coping strategies – the '«move against» and the '«move towards beneficiaries» – in the Citizen Income implementation process is that beneficiaries are subject to different treatment across the territory. The possibility for SLBs to make discretionary assessments of the referral process allows them to use conditionalities in various ways and, therefore, to sanction the beneficiaries differently. Thus, for the same situation within the same region, there would be some beneficiaries who are likely to lose their subsidy while there are others who are not.

A second consequence is that potential tensions can arise for the SLBs who strike a delicate balance between pursuing policy goals and tailoring support to the needs of the individual, and these tensions may have a direct impact on effective policy implementation.

These results contribute to advance our knowledge on the relationship between the use of discretion and coping mechanisms in the delivery of welfare conditionalities. Nevertheless, they also need to be interpreted with caution. Our analysis is, in fact, restricted to a single case study and thus suffers from limited external validity. In addition, the limited availability of the data does not allow us to draw a clear cause-effect relation between SLBs behaviour and motivations behind it.

A promising line of inquiry for future research would be to investigate the impact of the political attitudes, such as alignment with political and policy goals expressed by ruling parties, organisational routines, and governance context, such as performance management system, on SLBs' behavioural and cognitive coping strategies (Van Berkel 2020; Paraciani and Rizza 2021; Paraciani 2023).

More empirical research should be conducted therefore to corroborate the results of our research, which, at this stage, still represents an exploratory study.

APPENDIX

TAB. 4. *The geographical structure of the Dashboard.*

	Belluno	Padua	Rovigo	Treviso	Venice	Verona	Vicenza
Employment Centres	Agordo	Campobassano	Adria	Castelfranco V.	Chioggia	Affile	Arzignano
	Feltre	Cittadella	Polesine	V. Conegliano	Dolo	Bovolon	Bassano d/G
	Pieve d/C	Conselve	Rovigo	Montebelluna	Jesolo	Legnago	Lonigo
		Este		Oderzo	Mirano	San Bonifacio	Schio
		Monselice		Treviso	Portogruaro	Verona	Thiene
		Padua		Vittorio Veneto	San Donà d/P	Villafranca d/V	Valdagno
		Piove d/S			Donà		Vicenza

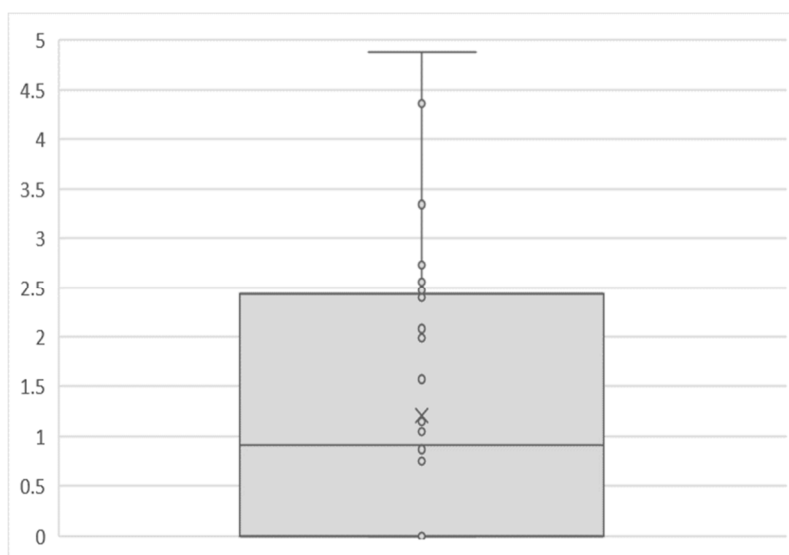
TAB. 5. *Administrative situation.*

Condition	Number of recipients
To be summoned for first appointment	761
With active convening for the agreement	142
To be resummoned (conditionality issued)	88
Without agreement and with an inconclusive appointment	38
Without agreement, no show-up (without justification)	101
Without agreement, no show-up (with justification)	18
Without agreement, appointment rescheduled (no date)	1
Without agreement. Showed-up (concluded)	95
Lapsed	24,965
Exempted	1,340
Excluded	3,088
Referred back to social services	985
With an agreement for employment	6,060
Concluded	16,111
Request accepted with previous agreement closed	255
Other	304

TAB. 6. *List of interviews.*

Interview	Province	Role	Date
1	Padua	Responsible and Case manager	29/09/2020
2	Padua	Responsible and Case manager	01/10/2020
3	Padua	Responsible and Case manager	06/10/2020
4	Padua	Responsible	08/10/2020
5	Venice	Responsible and Case manager	09/10/2020
6	Venice	Responsible	12/10/2020
7	Rovigo	Responsible	14/10/2020
8	Rovigo	Responsible	16/10/2020
9	Treviso	Responsible and Case manager	19/10/2020
10	Treviso	Responsible and Case manager	20/10/2020
11	Rovigo	Responsible	21/10/2020
12	Treviso	Responsible	22/10/2020
13	Treviso	Responsible	23/10/2020
14	Belluno	Responsible	27/10/2020
15	Treviso	Responsible and Case manager	28/10/2020
16	Verona	Responsible and Case manager	03/11/2020
17	Belluno	Responsible	04/11/2020
18	Belluno	Responsible	04/11/2020
19	Verona	Responsible	05/11/2020
20	Verona	Responsible	09/11/2020
21	Verona	Responsible and Case manager	09/11/2020
22	Vicenza	Case manager	11/11/2020
23	Vicenza	Responsible	16/11/2020
24	Treviso	Responsible and Case manager	16/11/2020
25	Vicenza	Responsible and Case manager	16/11/2020
26	Vicenza	Responsible and Case manager	17/11/2020
27	Venice	Responsible	17/11/2020
28	Venice	Responsible and Case manager	18/11/2020
29	Padua	Responsible	09/02/2021
30	Padua	Responsible	10/02/2021
31	Verona	Case manager	10/02/2021
32	Vicenza	Case manager	15/02/2021

FIG. 4. *Box-and-Whiskers Plot of the average number of conditionality among CPIs (per thousand).*



TAB. 7. *Distribution of conditionality between men and women.*

	Total	Men	Women (ab. val.)	Women (%)
Total	54,352	24,992	29,360	54.02
Conditionality	88	49	39	44.32
Non-conditionality	54,264	24,943	29,321	54.03

$\chi^2 (1, N = 54,352) = 3.34$ $p = 0.0677$

TAB. 8. *Distribution of Italians' conditionality across provinces.*

	Total	Women without conditionality	Women with conditionality (ab. val.)	Women with conditionality (%)
Total	34,569	34,522	47	0.14
Belluno	885	885	0	0.00
Padua	6,603	6,593	10	0.15
Rovigo	2,582	2,582	0	0.00
Treviso	5,300	5,296	4	0.08
Venice	7,149	7,147	2	0.03
Verona	6,864	6,846	18	0.26
Vicenza	5,186	5,173	13	0.25

$\chi^2 (6, N = 34,569) = 25.3033$ $p = 0.0003$ (***) $p < 0.005$

TAB. 9. *Distribution of foreigners' conditionality across provinces.*

	Total	Foreigner without conditionality	Foreigner with conditionality (ab. val.)	Foreigner with conditionality (%)
Total	19,783	19,742	41	0.21
Belluno	438	438	0	0.00
Padua	4,088	4,079	9	0.22
Rovigo	1,490	1,488	2	0.13
Treviso	2,970	2,967	3	0.10
Venice	3,395	3,388	7	0.21
Verona	4,702	4,688	14	0.30
Vicenza	2,700	2,694	6	0.22

$\chi^2 (6, N = 19,783) = 4.8392$, $p = 0.5646$

TAB. 10. *Distribution of conditionality between foreigners coming from rich and poor countries.*

	Total	Rich countries	Poor countries (ab. val.)	Poor countries (%)
Total	54,352	37,719	16,633	30.60
Conditionality	88	52	36	40.91
Non-conditionality	54,264	37,667	16,597	30.59
Percentage of conditionality	0.16%	0.14%	0.22%	

$\chi^2 (1, N = 54,352) = 4.4066, p = 0.0358^{**}$

TAB. 11. *Distribution of foreigners' (poor countries only) conditionality across provinces.*

	Total	Poor countries without conditionality	Poor countries with conditionality (ab. val.)	Poor countries with conditionality (%)
Total	16,633	16,597	36	0.22
Belluno	395	395	0	0.00
Padua	3,301	3,292	9	0.27
Rovigo	1,205	1,204	1	0.08
Treviso	2,605	2,602	3	0.12
Venice	2,857	2,851	6	0.21
Verona	3,925	3,912	13	0.33
Vicenza	2,345	2,341	4	0.17

$\chi^2 (6, N = 16,633) = 6.1987, p = 0.4013$

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